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"His hand fell upon hers as it rested on the wall beside him. He felt it tremble under his touch, and clasping it in his own, he bent down and softly kissed the fingers." *See page 348.*

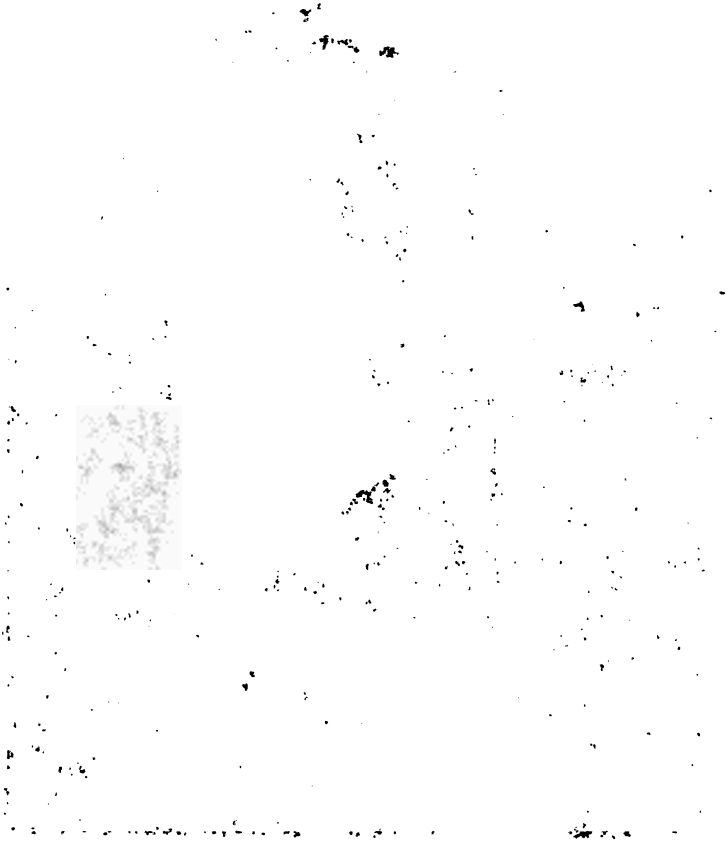
From the drawing by Robert Edwards.

THE MARRIAGE OF CECILIA

BY

MAUDE LEESON

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press
1914



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TRANSFER FROM C. of A. MAY 1923

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THE MARRIAGE OF CECILIA

and a mind quick to respond to any hint or promise of beauty. Her demands on life were not really extravagant. She thought she could have loved any one of the red brick villas that had been her home if she could have carried it away bodily and set it down, solitary, in the heart of the green country. But such rows and rows of them!—and all alike!—and to have lived among nothing but these for all her twenty-five years!

To persons of a certain soft and sentimental temperament—Cecilia's temperament—the meanest hovel may seem a palace if shared with the right sort of people. She shared her red brick villa with her half-brother John and his wife Emmeline, and often felt that a hovel to herself would have seemed a palace in comparison.

Not that she actively disliked John; he was her brother after all, and Cecilia had not a nature capable of disliking her own brother; and for Emmeline, the fact that she was John's wife precluded every other sentiment but pity. But in this frigid zone of toleration her feelings remained obstinately bound. The most painstaking effort could not bring them into the more genial circle of the affections or within sight of that line where love is born.

John Ward, indeed, was not a person whom even a sister could easily love. He was a big, burly man of the bull-dog type, with a sanguine complexion, hard, bright, prominent, blue eyes, thick neck and projecting lower jaw. These are signatures of character that rarely lie, and they did not in John's case. In business life he was blustering, assertive, and suspicious, possessed with the ineradicable belief that the whole world was in league to "do" him; in the family

circle tyrannical, given to shouting down the faintest whisper of opposition.

But opposition from his wife or sister he seldom encountered. If his own tones were too harsh and crude to please a fastidious taste, Emmeline had no colour at all. She was a little, faded woman, with sharp-cut but insignificant features, washed-out grey eyes, and a tight frizz of dust-coloured hair, closely netted above a high narrow forehead. She had the negative good taste which never offends the senses or sensibilities of others with bright colours, loud tones, hasty movements, or ill-bred enthusiasms. All her qualities, poor soul, and all the feelings she inspired, were negative. Even Cecilia, who had more affection in her nature than she knew what to do with, could not manage to love her. A certain fellow-feeling held them together in the frequently recurring domestic storms that shook the household, but in fair weather Emmeline always reverted to the side of her husband, between whom and herself existed more real community of taste than between either and Cecilia. Fifteen years of subordination to a loud-voiced mate had robbed Mrs. Ward of any individuality she might once have possessed. She had become a timid, plaintive reproduction of her lord's whims and prejudices. To her sister-in-law she seemed John over again in a minor key.

The husband and wife were alike in caring a great deal about things for which she did not care at all, and ignoring others that would have made her happiness. They both thought much of money, and were anxious to save in ways which fretted her soul, and to spend on matters which to her seemed worthless. They had no love for books. John never read them at

all, and Emmeline only from a sense of duty—so many pages a day, and a book-mark to keep her place. Their taste for art was satisfied with one afternoon a year at the Royal Academy, and for music when Emmeline was over-persuaded into taking tickets for a local concert and John accompanied her, grumbling, that the tickets might not be wasted. Their annual holiday was arranged with less consideration for the scenery of any spot they might visit than for the table kept at the particular boarding-house or hotel they patronized. Their ambitions were not ones with which Cecilia had the smallest sympathy. In her own phrase, they were both satisfied with red brick; they only craved for more extensive areas of it; they wanted it more curtained and cushioned against all physical discomfort, more padded with upholstery, more crowded with the very things that already crowded her soul to suffocation.

There was a common in the suburb where Cecilia lived, as there is in many South London suburbs. When she could escape from the morning's shopping or the afternoon calling, when it was not Emmeline's At Home day, and there was no special service at St. Clement's Church, it was here that she fled for distraction. Here, among green grass and gorse and bramble bushes she could breathe a freer air and feel a wider sky above her. Away from the rustic benches under the trees, the pond with its water-fowl, the children, nursemaids, and schoolboy cricketers, she could see visions and dream dreams.

A railway cutting crossed the common. Over the wooden railings that headed the embankment—an even more popular resort with the nursemaids and their charges than the pond and the ducks—look-

ing away to the north, one could see the smoky haze that meant London.

It was not London itself for which Cecilia longed; only London as the centre of the world, from which all roads lead to the four corners of the globe. Streets and houses, shops and theatres, flagged pavement and surging traffic had no place in her visions. The serpentine line of rails slipping away to the north had a fascination for her only as the first stage of a journey whose end was the end of the earth.

Cecilia's day-dreams always began with a white sail sparkling on a blue sea—the winds of heaven wafted her to ports and happy havens, free and untrammelled as a bird. But she was not blind to the practical side of travel. She recognized that the wildest ventures must have prosaic beginnings. If you are a person of modest circumstances, and live in a south-west suburb of London, though your objective may be the highest peak of the Himalayas, the farthest palm-fringed isle washed by the heaving blue of a tropic sea, the barest burning waste of the Sahara, or the most distant point of icy desolation lying beneath the polar lights, you will probably have to start with the London, Chatham, and Dover.

So, hurrying across the common in the twilight, with her latest book of travels from the Free Library tucked under her arm, she always slackened her footsteps when she came to the railway embankment and looked wistfully to the north. A tall, thin young woman, pale, plain, and badly dressed, with a nervous absent manner, yet even in her defects keeping well within the lines of the commonplace and inconspicuous, if any one had noticed her in passing—but nobody ever did, there was absolutely nothing about her to

arrest a cursory glance—he—it would more probably have been she—would have seen little outward sign in her of the eager spirit fretting at its bonds.

Sometimes in the summer dusk, when the new moon hung like a silver boat above the slate roofs and chimney stacks, and the evening planet became a trembling point of light in the dusty haze, the girl eyed with whimsical discontent even these unconscious travellers. They looked down on those far distant lands which she might never view. They saw the mountains lifting their snowy peaks, sublime in awful purity, into the blue ether; the vast pine forests clothing the lesser heights, the leaping torrent, the sleeping plain below. They saw the white-walled town looking out over the sandy wastes of the desert, the still waters of the rock-girdled bay, the long, lonely stretches of prairie and veld, the whispering shade of the jungle, the endless fields of everlasting ice. And she saw nothing day by day but streets and houses, the common and the duck-pond, and the railway cutting, where she stood and watched the tail lights of the trains whisk out of sight, carrying happy passengers northward to London or southward to the sea.

All Cecilia's reading at this time of her life was of voyages and discoveries. She could not always obtain the latest accounts of travel, for John considered a subscription to Mudie's a senseless extravagance when he already supported the Free Library at the rate of three farthings in the pound, and Emmeline said you could always get from that institution the books you wanted if you didn't mind waiting for them. Whether Cecilia minded or not she had to wait, and her favourite literature came to her, as most things did that came at all, with its first freshness gone, and when the

edge of her desire was a little dulled. But she would scarcely look at any other books. Romances, poetry of the passions, novels that were merely love-stories, she sternly rejected. There may have been a time when other tastes prevailed and more girlish fancies filled her mind; for, try as she might to scourge all human nature out of herself, she remained very much a woman. But at twenty-five she had learned, she thought, to fit her imagination to her circumstances. Of love and lovers she never expected to have any personal experience. Fortune might some day make a traveller of her, but no power on earth could transform her into a heroine of romance. On that point her conviction was unshakable.

And not unreasonably so. In all her twenty-five years she had not caught the most fleeting look of admiration in any man's eyes, or heard a whisper of the accents of flirtation. No partner had ever asked her hand at a dance in any tone but one of perfunctory politeness, nor sought her side in a drawing-room after dinner unless all the other ladies and chairs were occupied. Proposals of marriage, she cynically suspected, might conceivably be made to her, but that she might care for the kind of man who would want to marry her, or that the kind of a man she might care for would ever ask her to be his wife, were possibilities not to be entertained. The idea that she might marry without any caring at all on either side never entered her head. The marriage of convenience, pure and simple, is not general in the suburbs.

Yet Cecilia was not ugly, not even unredeemably plain. Many a woman with no better stock in trade has gone through the world with all the triumphant assurance of beauty. There was no particular defect

in her face, but a general absence of charm. Her features were not noticeably irregular, her skin was fine and clear. Her eyes and hair might even have been effective if she had possessed the least idea how to make the best of them. But she treated her hair as something to be done up out of the way and to show as little as possible, and her eyes as organs of vision, never as a vehicle of expression, which as every pretty woman knows, is one of the principal things that eyes are for.

Cecilia knew nothing that every pretty woman knows, or, if she did, a fierce self-contempt kept her from acting on the knowledge. The perverse reluctance of the average Englishwoman to make the best of her own good points was heightened in her case by a nervous dread of tactless comment and loud-voiced fraternal criticism. She was acutely sensitive, miserably self-conscious, morbidly shy.

With all this it is, of course, unnecessary to add that she was not at all popular. Even in the suburbs people do not want to be bored, and nobody as shy and self-distrustful as Cecilia, as conscious of her deficiencies and as immovably convinced of her own inability to charm, ever yet failed to be a bore in any society in the world.

Keenly aware of the fact, she would never, of her own free will, have ventured into society at all. But Emmeline, being one of the happier class of bores who are spared self-knowledge, had no dislike to company; she sat in state in her drawing-room twice a month expecting it, and went out calling in search of it at least two or three times in the week, dragging, when possible, her reluctant sister-in-law with her.

Thus Cecilia, self-conscious for both, had to ac-

custom herself to hearing, in the intervals of her own painful, halting efforts at conversation, Emmeline's little tedious trickle of commonplaces on the other side of the room, and the brief, bored responses of her own victim echoed by those of her sister's; to see, at their entrance, the eager glow of genial gossip fade from the face of their hostess, to catch, as they withdrew, the relieved sigh as of a painful duty discharged, to feel that, like the flow of cold water into a tank, the appearance of her sister-in-law and herself in any drawing-room in the neighbourhood lowered the social temperature by several degrees. And then to walk home beside Emmeline, unconscious and self-complacent, raging inwardly herself with self-contempt and pitilessly belabouring her "sister ass"—that blundering, awkward, outward personality that seemed ordained to bear through the world the inward ego Cecilia, which was something so different! Sometimes she felt inclined to envy her sister-in-law her lack of vision. "Oh, if one must be dull and stupid, to be so dull and stupid that one did not know it!" But the wish never remained with her long. Not for all the serenity of mind a want of perception can give would she have ceased that same restless ego in the little, narrow, colourless mental world that was Emmeline's.

Deep down in her own mind she knew that she was not dull and stupid at all—only a sensitive, shrinking mollusc, unhappy in her shell. There was a spark of humour beneath her morbid diffidence and repression, but the conversational fuel supplied in suburban society as she knew it never kindled that spark to any flame. It was not easy to be brilliant and epigrammatic about the weather, the engagement of the

curate to the vicar's daughter, the proceeds of the latest church bazaar. She talked bald commonplaces because the real interests of her life were not commonplace, and her feeling about them was too keen and vital to suffer her to introduce them into casual speech. She could not chatter lightly with the other girls of dances, theatres, and tennis. She rarely went to dances, and never enjoyed herself when she did; tennis and theatres were enjoyments John frowned upon; her indulgence in both was so slight that she hesitated to speak of it, not having the art some of her more sophisticated acquaintances possessed of making very little social experience go—conversationally—a long way.

The afternoon call was then a species of torment to Cecilia. But a still lower circle of the social inferno was entered when her brother "brought a friend home to dinner." When the visitor was a man of John's own type, apart from the fuss that preceded, and the growlings of dissatisfaction that followed the entertainment, things were not so bad; that is, they were merely dull, and Cecilia never objected to the merely dull. On these occasions the two men would talk "shop," and though she had herself no commercial instincts whatever, she had such an unconquerable bias towards subjects that were real and vital that she preferred this business talk to the "calling" chat of Emmeline and her friends, and was even sorry when her sister-in-law, who never believed that a woman could feel any interest in a man's conversation that was not addressed and adapted to herself, tried to draw her apart into little trivial domestic discussions. To these guests, about whom she cared nothing, she could even make herself sufficiently entertaining.

It was when, as occasionally happened, the visitor was of another stamp, and one which interested her, that her sufferings became acute. Dumb with misery and mortification, she sat through what seemed interminable courses, crumbling her bread and twisting and wringing her hands beneath the table, listening with a sensitive, tortured ear, which no sisterly affection could dull, to her brother's voice holding forth on things in general, the loud, blustering tones betraying the narrow aims and outlook of the underbred city man. Her anguish was not less when the closing of the door behind herself and Emmeline left John's display of his defects of mind and manner to her imagination; but it was not relief she felt when the bored and weary victim was at length allowed to join them in the drawing-room. The last hour, indeed, was usually the crowning point of the evening's discomfort; for John, as a formal rite, demanded music, and to prevent unpleasant remarks later she was obliged to go to the piano.

This was the point over which Cecilia's cheeks grew hottest in her recollection next day. She was not a brilliant performer, and her voice had not been well trained. The shyness and self-consciousness which were her curse, the nervous headache, brought on by hours of smarting humiliation, prevented her doing herself anything like justice. Her cold and shaking fingers seemed to stumble at the simplest chords, her trembling voice to be unable to produce true notes.

Whether the performance was or was not the painful exhibition she imagined, it was fortunately the culmination of her ordeal. Even John's scathing comments on the poor return for all the money he had expended on musical tuition were rendered mercifully

brief by his desire to get to bed and rest from the labours of hospitality. Cecilia could fly to her own room, and read Marcus Aurelius as she brushed her hair, and try to feel that it didn't matter what people thought of you.

Or she would write in her diary a cynical picture of the humours of the evening, sparing neither John, nor Emmeline, nor the guest, and least of all herself. Perhaps the cynicism was not so deep as she fancied, for Cecilia's temper was radically and incurably gentle, and the humour had a way of disappearing at the calm reperusal of a later day; but the writing of it gave her at the time a certain satisfaction. As much satisfaction, at least, as Marcus Aurelius, which is not, perhaps, saying a great deal.

CHAPTER II

MULTIPLE PERSONALITY

THERE was a time in her life when Cecilia thought she would not always be Cecilia.

In those days, all ignorant of the binding fetters of temperament, she imagined it was possible to grow up the sort of person you would like to be; the only difficulty was to choose your ideal.

She was a plain little girl, extremely shy, and with no outward attraction whatever, but she had imagination. She thought shyness was a failing of youth which one invariably outgrew in the course of years. Her plainness, she fancied, not so inevitably but still very probably, would drop from her like a mantle as she reached woman's estate. Of the dull little grub that was Cecilia she had the poorest possible opinion, but she never doubted that from that grub in time the most radiant-winged creature might emerge. The only thing that bothered her was the exact form that splendid transmigration should take.

She was an impressionable child, though nobody would have suspected it, and her ideals wavered. As ambition fired her she astonished with her learning, thrilled with her acting, held the world captive with her voice.

Gradually these conflicting possibilities resolved themselves into two distinct personalities, which,

with the years, became as real to Cecilia as the uninteresting young woman whom her friends knew by that name, who went dully about her humdrum life, and figured so poorly in red-brick society. These other selves, shorn by experience of some of their more shining attributes, were a bright and cheerful young person, with a practical humorous outlook upon life, who was called Cecil, and a sweet and gracious maiden, compact of all delicate, feminine charm, whom, following out an old childish fancy, she had christened Celia.

As a schoolgirl Cecil was all that Cecilia longed and lacked courage to be. Whilst she plodded dutifully at her tasks, shy, retiring, law-abiding, this unrecognized projection of her personality plotted wild mischief and led in fancy a band of chosen spirits into most hazardous adventure. Cecil kept a diary in which she chronicled the doings of the school world with bright audacious schoolgirl wit and racy slang. It afforded Cecilia the most gratifying reading when the other girls snubbed her or let her severely alone, as a tame and spiritless little creature with no fun in her.

She often laughed to herself over Cecil's bright, funny sayings, but when, on rare occasions, she ventured in her own person to repeat them nobody seemed to see that they were funny at all, and she there and then perceived the great truth that it is not what you say but how you say it that brings the world's applause. Like an ill-lighted squib, she flung her joke fearfully into the company and bolted to cover, and was as much relieved as disappointed when she saw it fizzle out ignominiously. This is not the way to set even a school table in a roar, and the reputation of a humorist was never hers. Nevertheless this

humour of Cecil's, though it never made any public illumination, did make a cheering fire at which Cecilia could privately warm her own shivering soul.

As she grew older, and dreamed the fond, foolish dreams of girlhood, it was not, however, as Cecil that she most wished to live her life.

> "All I could never be,
> All men ignored in me,"—

this was Celia, that fair ideal, to stupid, gauche, unattractive Cecilia. There was something after all of her real essential self in that creation of her mind, it was hard that in outward semblance they should be such worlds apart. In her moments of bitter self-abasement, when timidity seemed to make her cringing and contemptible beyond all words, there would float across her mind a tantalizing vision of Celia, calm-eyed, serene, self-poised, never weakly smiling at jests which did not amuse her or yielding assent to opinions which she did not share, but bearing herself with a delicate, proud reticence, speaking her mind with grave candour, in a voice like a silver bell.

On this last point Cecilia most nearly touched her ideal. Her voice was naturally charming in tone. But few people realized how charming it could be. In her daily life its varying inflections were concealed by a studiously dry, matter-of-fact manner of speech, in company nervousness more often than not divested it of all expression whatever. Only in the rarest moments of abandon was it so deepened with feeling or stirred by laughter that even Emmeline's attention was caught by it. But she was not an impressionable person, and her ear was not attuned to niceties of

intonation. She merely thought that her sister-in-law sometimes spoke rather affectedly.

Nobody but Cecilia really knew what she could do with her voice, and she only did it when she was alone in her own room with the door locked, when Emmeline was out, and the maids beyond hearing in the kitchen. Then she could read and declaim boldly, and imagine herself a great actress.

If she possessed any other essential of an actress's equipment, nobody suspected it; indeed, few of her acquaintances would have given her credit for the one she had. Even at school she had never been considered good at recitation. She always knew how things should be said. Often in class, when she had heard the other girls stumbling and mumbling over some passage of stately prose, or repeating tamely and lifelessly some sublime lines that have stirred the heart's blood of generations of men, she burned and tingled to show them how these should sound, where the emphasis should come, how the voice should rise and fall, how this word or that should ring with feeling; but when her own turn came and she stood up in her place with cold, careless, scrutinizing glances turned upon her, the old familiar demon of shyness seized her once more, and her own recitation was just as lifeless, just as expressionless as any.

When Cecilia was young and hopeful she had no doubt that sooner or later she must evolve into either Cecil or Celia. She saw the destiny prepared for her in either case. Cecil was to be a spinster, lively, intelligent, with a crowd of friends of both sexes. Celia would pass through the most romantic love affairs to a happy marriage. She had never considered the destiny of Cecilia. But this, as time went by,

gradually showed itself the only one demanding consideration. She grew up certainly, but from plain uninteresting Cecilia she grew into plain, uninteresting Miss Ward, and that was all the difference.

She had always imagined that some day the cramping shell that held her would break, and she would wing her way to a larger, freer world; but nothing of the sort happened. There was no solution of the dull continuity of her life, no break in the yearly routine, no change, no visit. She lived among people who had watched her grow up from a child; if she met any strangers it was under the eyes of these lifelong acquaintances who knew exactly what she was, and how she would speak and act. Dulness and shyness were expected of her; her character as an uninteresting person who didn't count was established. It would have required a courage that was no part of her character to break away from these traditions and develop on other lines.

Sometimes she reproached herself for submitting so tamely to a life of such limited conditions. In despairing moments she thought wildly of making a sally into the wide world and winning a glorious freedom and independence. But her more rational hours dismissed the idea. She had no talent which, brought into the world's market, she could trust to secure her a living wage. To take any of the domestic positions open to women of no speciality would be simply to exchange one form of servitude for another; and if to be snubbed and bullied was her destiny, she preferred to be snubbed and bullied by her own flesh and blood.

It was not altogether poorness of spirit that made her submissive under domestic tyranny. More supporting than the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius, or

a sense of humour so strong that it could find diversion in the records of her own social failures and ineptitudes, was the secret knowledge that set her apart from other less fortunate women who linger out their lives in positions of dependency, that the uncongenial circumstances of her lot were not likely to be permanent.

More than a quarter of a century before, her mother, pretty, bright-eyed Cecilia Palmer, had led a life almost as dull as her daughter's as companion in the house of her elderly cousin Ursula. Like her daughter, she wearied of her monotonous life, and being pretty and bright-eyed, found an easy, though not particularly exciting way out of it by marrying a widower, William Ward, a quiet, gentle, book-loving, and not very young man, a clerk in the Bank of England. Cousin Ursula was moderately pleased at the match. She had undertaken to provide for her husband's young relative, but she was not very fond of parting with her money. She let the girl go slenderly dowered to her husband, but put her down in her will for a sum of five thousand pounds.

This legacy the elder Cecilia did not live to enjoy; she died when her baby was born, to the inexpressible grief of her husband. William Ward, shy, gentle, retiring, with a chivalrous regard for women and no self-protective instinct whatever, had found himself at twenty-two unaccountably united in marriage to his landlady's daughter, a loud-voiced, high-coloured blonde, a good five years older than himself. It may have been a recollection of the guileless manner in which he fell a victim to her wiles that gave his wife the poor opinion of his intelligence she retained through life, an opinion imbibed by his son long before

he grew out of boyhood. There was very little sympathy between himself and his father, and it was probably the elder Ward's deepest regret, in quitting a life that had brought him no great happiness, that he was obliged to leave his little daughter to her half-brother's care.

About a year after his death, when Cecilia was ten years old, she paid a memorable visit to her cousin and godmother. Mrs. Palmer lived at Brighton, in a sleepy, old-fashioned square, far away from the sea—far away, it seemed, from everything that meant life and colour and movement. Her tall old house, crowded with heavy, antique furniture, and pervaded by a drowsy peace, made Cecilia think of the Sleeping Beauty's palace, and her cousin, in her high, winged arm-chair, of the wicked fairy. Cousin Ursula was not really very old at that time, barely sixty indeed, but to her goddaughter she was of quite uncountable antiquity.

Cecilia enjoyed that visit; it made her feel as if she were living in a story, but it was not very exciting. Every afternoon they went for a drive along the King's Road, Cousin Ursula on the front seat, banked up with cushions and rugs, Cecilia and the fat pug on the back. Every evening her godmother played patience, and Cecilia sat by and shuffled her cards—she often thought it significant, in after-years, that the one thing her godmother taught her was the game of patience. The only element of brightness in the household was an old Irish maid, who took a fancy to the little girl and told her stories, and with whom Cecilia afterwards kept up a fitful correspondence until her death.

At the end of a fortnight she returned home, somewhat depressed in spirit, feeling that she had not been

the bright, entertaining little visitor she would have wished to be. As a matter of fact, her gentle docility and subdued manner pleased the dull, selfish old woman much more than the high spirits and gleeful exactions of a more spontaneous child. She gave her goddaughter ten shillings at parting to buy herself a present, and the next day altered her will, making the sum to be inherited by the latter at her death ten thousand pounds. The one piece of generosity cost her no more than the other, for she spent but a fraction of her money, and let the rest lie by year after year, quietly doubling itself. She informed John Ward at the time of her intentions towards his sister, but desired him to keep the fact to himself—she did not want her godchild to be married one day for her little bit of money. Even at ten years old it seemed to be taken for granted that no one would marry Cecilia for love.

This secrecy was only a matter of regret to Emmeline. John did not care one way or the other. Neither did Cecilia. It was sufficient for her to know that this hidden treasure lay somewhere waiting for her along the path of life. Ten thousand pounds may seem an insignificant sum to some people, but to the lonely, dreamy little girl in the suburbs it was as the wealth of all the Indies. To the woman who grew up in the place of that child it was not wealth, but it was freedom, happiness, the promise of life itself. All her visions started from the hour when that money would be hers. But she was tender-hearted, and had a conscience; she tried not to wish too eagerly for a gift that could only come to her from dead hands.

A few months after her visit Cousin Ursula had what was vaguely termed a stroke. She never spoke

a conscious word again, but her bodily health seemed to improve as her mind decayed. Her life was that of a living, breathing machine, but it might last, the doctors said, for ten, twenty, possibly thirty years. It had lasted already for fifteen when Cecilia reached her twenty-fifth birthday.

CHAPTER III

CUP AND LIP

NEVER, probably, in her life again will Cecilia feel so old as when she awoke on the morning of her twenty-fifth birthday.

A quarter of a century!—it sounded so much worse put in this way that it was naturally thus Cecilia felt obliged to phrase it to herself—probably a third of her life gone! and she had done nothing and been nowhere, she had garnered no experiences, and made herself no place in the life of any human being. Youth was slipping away from her, and she had never yet begun to live. Cousin Ursula might live to be a hundred——

She caught herself up sharply. It was horrible to have such thoughts, to find herself reckoning on the death of a fellow-creature, even though that death meant the end of nothing that could be called life. But why—oh, why—when she still possessed her faculties, had Cousin Ursula not *given* the money that would have meant no loss to herself? Now, when it came to her she supposed she would be forty or fifty, quite middle-aged, and beyond the power of enjoying it.

Propping herself on her elbow, she caught sight of her own face in the tilted glass of her dressing-table, and shook her head at it.

She was a fright; wouldn't it be better, perhaps, to be fifty at once and feel that it didn't matter being hideous and poor?

The unimportance of one's looks at fifty, like the incapacity of any person of middle-age to get real pleasure out of money, is one of youth's instinctive beliefs. Cecilia was too much occupied at that moment in studying her own reflection to consider whether either of these beliefs is quite borne out by experience.

The face in the glass was not ugly. There was life and animation in it at least. There was also youth, though Cecilia's eyes were too young to see it. Her hair fell over her shoulder in a thick, dark plait; a strand ruffled across her forehead, softening its usual severity of outline; her cheeks had a touch of colour. her eyes were bright. This was the real, natural Cecilia, not frozen by shyness into stiff restraint. But scarcely one of Emmeline's callers or acquaintances would have recognized her.

Her glance travelled on to the window. It was a wet and foggy morning; the prospect without was as dismal and uncheering as November could make it. It required some courage to rise and face a world so uninviting. And the new year before her was no brighter in its promise than this new day. It would mean, she supposed, the same old weary round of unprofitable duties and unenlivening distractions, aimless walks and barren calls, endless domestic discussions with Emmeline, perpetual grumbling and fault-finding from John.

She sighed, staring drearily out of the window. She had an uncomfortable feeling at the back of her mind that her troubles were small and sordid, and that she

herself, in her unhappiness and discontent, was rather absurd; but this did not cheer her. Surely a sorrow's crown of sorrow is to know that one's griefs are less sublime than ridiculous.

Half an hour after, she came down late to breakfast. Her brother and sister were seated at the table. Neither of them remembered the day as a special anniversary. Emmeline extended a chilly cheek to be kissed. John was too occupied in grumbling over the viands to give her any greeting at all.

She slipped into her place and applied herself to her breakfast, to a half-heard accompaniment of railings from her brother over the fact that the toast was tough, the negligence and incompetence of a household that permitted such a catastrophe, and the hardness of his lot in having his creature comforts so disregarded in a home of his own providing. Made wise by painful experience, she would gladly have kept silent and left Emmeline to utter the necessary pacifications; but this did not please John, who when he thus raised a storm in the family teacup was never satisfied till every member was caught in its eddies.

"Considering you've nothing to do all day long but amuse yourselves, both of you," he growled presently in his sister's direction, "I should think you might spare a few minutes now and then to see to the housekeeping. There's Cecilia. One might suppose she would be glad to make some little return for all that's been done for her by looking after her brother's comfort. It isn't much I expect of her, but I suppose that little's too much."

Cecilia's heart began to beat rather quickly. She never had been able to meet John's angry unreason with the philosophic calm she felt was required.

"It is not a question of trouble, John," she said, rather breathlessly, "but it wouldn't add to your comfort at all if I interfered with the cook. She wouldn't stand it. You know, Emmeline, you told me yourself——"

"Oh, I don't think I quite meant that," Emmeline disclaimed in a flutter. It would never do to let John suppose the servants not amenable to discipline. He was quite capable of descending to the kitchen himself to crush any spirit of revolt, and no road could lead straighter to the registry office. It was a pity that Cecilia had to be flung to the wolves, but what are the feelings of a sister-in-law compared with those of a cook? "Of course a little supervision is necessary at times with the best of servants, and I am sure, if it were very nicely put, cook wouldn't object!——"

"Object! I should like to see her! But the fact is, Cecilia considers all this sort of thing beneath her. She thinks she's too good to do anything but sit with her hands before her all day."

Cecilia opened her lips to protest, thought better of it, and closed them again. But she might just as well have spoken.

"Yes, you do!" shouted her brother. "You know you do, though hanged if I can see why. My mother wasn't too fine a lady to go into the kitchen and see after her servants herself, and, Gad! I don't see why your mother's daughter should be. Fine lady, indeed! You seem to forget that you haven't got a penny piece to bless yourself with, and if I didn't provide you with a home, and food to eat, and clothes to wear, there'd be precious little of the fine lady about you!"

"I don't forget it, John," said Cecilia.

In spite of her most strenuous efforts her voice would shake a little, and the hand that held her coffee cup trembled. John looked across at her and grunted. Beyond a general desire to make himself unpleasant he had meant nothing by his railings. He did not really grudge his sister a home, and had no wish to send her out into the world to earn her own living. He had the large, sultanesque qualities of his despotic temper. He liked to have two women in his house, ministering to his wants and trembling before his frown. But like all tyrants, he liked to crack his whip occasionally and see his slaves cringe. His sense of importance duly gratified, he was willing to lay the instrument of discipline aside.

"Well, all right," he said, in a milder tone, "you needn't take me up like that. What's the good of flying into a passion over every little thing that's said to you?"

"I didn't mean to be cross," said Cecilia gently, remembering certain good resolutions made in her own room. "But don't scold me any more this morning, John. It's my birthday."

"Well, what if it is, there's no need to be disagreeable about it! You've done nothing but make one snappy remark after another ever since you came to breakfast? How old are you? Twenty-six? By Jove, you are getting on."

"Cecilia must hurry up," said Emmeline, trying to make a pleasant remark to obliterate her baseness with regard to the cook. "I had been married three years when I was twenty-six."

"I am twenty-five," said Cecilia. "Not that it matters, of course. I am no more likely to be married next year than this."

"And a good thing too, unless you mean to be a little more particular about your husband's comfort than you are about your brother's," growled John, who thought the conversation was taking too light and cheerful a tone. They were actually forgetting that the toast had been hard.

"Oh, you never can tell," pursued Emmeline graciously. "If you were to come into your money and have a nice little income of your own, it is surprising what a difference it might make."

John took up the paper. He had the contemptuous indifference of his kind for any discussion of marriage in the abstract. When women got on that subject he thought it time for a sensible man to withdraw from the conversation. Cecilia, as it happened, was not much more interested in the matter than he. She was equally willing to create a diversion.

"Is there anything in the paper this morning, John?"

"A lot it matters to you what's in the paper," was the gracious response. "I 'll trouble you for the marmalade, Cecilia—that's the second time I have had to ask for it. If you'd only attend more to people's wants instead of bothering about things in the paper that don't concern you——"

His words died away with an odd abruptness. He looked across the paper at his sister, his eyes getting larger and more prominent. "She's dead!" he said, with a complete change of voice. "Your godmother's dead, Cecilia!"

Cecilia put down the glass jar in her hand with careful precision; she knew that her fingers were trembling, and it seemed the one thing in the world that mattered to see that she did not let the glass clatter or fall. She

heard Emmeline's voice upraised in exclamation—it seemed to come from very far away. For herself she could say no word.

"'On the 15th inst.,'" read John, "'at——Square, Brighton; Ursula Mary, widow of the late Daniel Palmer; aged seventy-five years."

"The 15th! I wonder you haven't heard from Thornton. I might call in there to-day and find out how things are."

"Oh, no!" cried his sister involuntarily.

"Now there!" said John, putting down the paper in disgust, "that's just like you, Cecilia! What's the use of pretending that ten thousand pounds is a trifle of no consequence to you? I've no patience with such humbug!"

There was certainly no humbug about John's feelings. His eyes quite bulged with excitement. He read through the obituary notice a dozen times as if he could scarcely suck enough satisfaction from the lines. Then he gathered up his letters and went off in high good-humour. Cecilia almost wished he had gone on scolding her. The subtle tone of consideration towards herself which had crept, or which she fancied had crept, into the manner of her brother and his wife, jarred on her sensibilities. But then Cecilia was a hopelessly foolish person; as John said—there really was no pleasing her.

She sat at the table with her chin propped on her hands. Emmeline had risen and begun to put away the silver. She thought that Cecilia might get up and help her, but she did not like to suggest such a thing to some one who had just inherited ten thousand pounds.

"I wish it was a million!" said the girl suddenly.

Mrs. Ward stared aghast. This did not sound like Cecilia.

"Of course, it wouldn't really make it any better," the latter continued; "but it would seem less contemptible. All this for ten thousand pounds! It seems so small of us to care so much—and so little!"

"But one could scarcely pretend to be sorry," said Emmeline, vaguely divining the meaning of the last words. She would have been perfectly willing to assume the deportment of grief if circumstances had at all called for it; but here, even Cecilia must see that the effort might be spared.

"I don't want to pretend anything," said the girl, jumping up and walking to the window. "I know I'm not sorry. But I'm sorry I can't be."

Emmeline sighed uncomfortably; she hated people to talk in riddles. "I don't understand how you can want to be sorry," she rebuked the obvious absurdity.

Her sister stared thoughtfully out into the wet and dreary garden, at the rain splashing on the gravel. "Don't you think it is sad," she said softly, "that any one should pass out of the world, any one who has had a husband and little children, who has been a little child herself, and a young girl with lovers and friends, and of all the people who have loved her not one should be left to be sorry at her death?—not a soul should care about her passing away but those who are thinking of what she has left behind?"

She was touched and stirred by the news, carried out of herself by excitement, or she would not have spoken so to her brother's wife. Emmeline still looked blank.

"But she was so very old and her mind had quite gone. How could people be sorry? It was really a happy release."

Her sister-in-law smiled at the well-worn formula, but it quite satisfied Emmeline. She went on putting away the silver with a cheerful air.

Cecilia wandered restlessly to the drawing-room, and stood looking out of the window there. It was her duty at this hour to be watering the palms and ferns, but she could not settle to the ordinary routine of work. She was excited, upset. But not sorry, she repeated to herself bluntly. The sadness of that lonely, unwept death touched her, but was it not at bottom with a selfish sorrow that human beings could live so lonely and die so unregretted? Did she not see a faint, far-off shadowing of what her own life might be and end in? She thought of the hushed and darkened house where that silent figure had lain, with all the signs of mourning surrounding it, the cheerful daylight shut out, all the sacredness and seclusion of grief, and not a shadow darkening any heart. People coming and going with hushed voices and grave faces, thinking only of wills and legacies.

She would not let her thoughts dwell on her own legacy, but the consciousness of it was there at the back of her mind all day. Not yet as a joy. Like most natures long denied and timid to hope, this sudden fulfilment of her heart's desire startled more than it delighted her. It was as if a great burden had been lifted from her shoulders and she could not all at once adjust her balance. The hard and toilsome path of her daily life which had seemed to stretch far into the future had suddenly crumbled away before her, and instead of lifting her eyes to the sunny lands of promise beyond, she could only stand and stare stupidly down at the dust and *débris* of what had been.

Emmeline could not understand her attitude at all.

"So strange and apathetic!" she said to her husband. "Not a bit as if she were glad. I don't believe she would have thought of going into mourning if it hadn't been for me."

Mrs. Ward's own attention had been much occupied with mourning. Her sister-in-law was so peculiar that it was quite possible she would refuse to don the garments of bereavement; and how in that case were people to know that she had benefited by her cousin's death? She would not have considered it good form to make any announcement of the legacy, but she trusted to the sight of Cecilia's black to provoke questions that would make it natural and easy for her to impart the information. All that day and the next her mind worked happily, rehearsing scraps of dialogue between herself and her acquaintances, whom Emmeline, like other people, credited with a keenness of interest in her affairs not always justified by fact. But her husband's return from the city at an earlier hour than usual, with a clouded countenance and a gruff and surly manner, rudely diverted her thoughts into another channel.

"Anything from Thornton about the will?" he grunted, in answer to her timid queries. "No, and there isn't likely to be. D' you see that?"

He thrust into her hand a pink evening paper, and Emmeline, after one or two misguided attempts to read wholly irrelevant paragraphs which he impatiently intercepted, found the place he pointed to.

"Late last evening, Mr. Francis Thornton, a solicitor, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, standing on the platform at —— Junction in conversation with a couple of acquaintances, happened to step backward just as the Brighton express passed through the

station, and losing his balance, fell upon the lines and was killed instantly."

Francis Thornton was Mrs. Palmer's nephew, who had charge of her affairs.

"And you think his death will cause some delay in settling things?" Cecilia asked, breaking in on Emmeline's shocked ejaculations, in wonder at the thunder-cloud still resting on her brother's brow.

He laughed disagreeably. "If everything isn't pretty well settled already! Of course, the thing may have been an accident. But I don't like the sound of it. And I don't like the sound of some things I've been hearing about Francis Thornton to-day. The fact is, it has been criminal carelessness all along, the way everything has been left to that fellow. I always thought so, but when I said anything I was as good as told it was no business of mine. Since Alfred Palmer's death Thornton has had practically a free hand. And this is what comes of it! What else could you expect? I believe the fellow has been doing us all!"

CHAPTER IV

AN INTERVIEW

JOHN was right. His lifelong distrust of his fellows was justified at last by a clear case of wrong. In the person of his sister he had actually been "done."

It was long before Cecilia herself heard the whole of the story; but one point was very soon made plain to her. The full details of Francis Thornton's betrayal of trust, the reasons that led to his wild speculation with his cousin's money, and his choosing a voluntary death rather than a shameful exposure might be veiled or left vague to her; but one fact stood out with pitiless distinction—the money that was to have brought her freedom and release was gone. Tedious legal processes were still to settle whether the legacy bequeathed to "my goddaughter Cecilia Ursula Ward" had vanished in its entirety or whether she was to be mocked by a few poor tens where she had dreamed of thousands; but the golden gift that was to have purchased her freedom and independence would always remain a might-have-been. The chains of her old servitude were to bind her all her days.

It was a crushing blow, and it was not made easier for Cecilia to bear by Emmeline's perpetual harping on the grievous wrong and John's furious ragings.

Helplessly ignorant in legal matters, she had

resigned to her brother the task of protecting her interests in the slow unwinding of Francis Thornton's tangled affairs and the settlement of her claim on the bankrupt estate, but the temper he displayed at the most impartial discussion of the business with herself and the violent expressions he let fall from time to time with regard to Francis Thornton's family made her wish she could have chosen a calmer advocate.

She knew nothing of the Thorntons. John spoke of a widow with a comfortable private income settled upon herself, and of a conceited young coxcomb of a son who displayed no eagerness to set to work to pay off his father's debts. There seemed no hope in that direction for any effort to right the wrong, and, considering the probable nature of John's dealings with them, her one desire was to be spared any personal encounter with the family or its representatives. Therefore, when her brother gruffly informed her at breakfast one morning that he wanted her to meet him in town on business connected with her legacy, her soul was shaken with apprehension.

The set of John's chin as he met her at Charing Cross was not reassuring. It was pouring rain as they came out of the station, and he hustled her into a taxi and they drove through the dingy streets in sullen preoccupation on his part, mute depression on hers. The outlook was not cheering, and she was bitterly cold. She was fairly shivering with chill and nervousness when the cab set them down before a gloomy building overlooking a soaking, mist-veiled square, beside the door of which appeared the name of Francis Thornton.

A miserable foreboding of the nature of the interview before her filled her with shrinking and dread. Her

teeth pressed her lip, and she clutched at the stair-rail with a sick desperation as John, with a grim face, hurried her upward.

Two men descending the stairs looked at her curiously as they stood aside to let her pass. One of them nodded curtly in answer to an ungracious gesture of greeting from her brother. Cecilia wondered if these were the other disappointed legatees.

The office she entered could never, she thought, in its owner's most prosperous days have been a cheerful spot. Now, dusty and neglected-looking, with darkened, rain-drenched windows, it wore an air of gloom wholly in accord with her own spirit. A young man who sat writing at a table covered with papers looked up as they entered, and a faint, flitting shadow of disgust crossed his features as he recognized her brother. His air of unwelcome disconcerted Cecilia, who was foolishly sensitive about such trifles. She was further disconcerted, and loathed herself for being so, by the fact that the young man was exceedingly good-looking.

John curtly introduced Mr. Bernard Thornton. She could not help a glance of interest at the son of the man who had wrought such havoc in her life and hopes; but if the young man felt any interest in her as the victim of his father's wrongdoing, his handsome impassive features gave no sign of it. He acknowledged the introduction with a grave and distant courtesy that hinted at no sense of disgrace. His face was pale, however, and slightly worn; his grey eyes shadowed and bleak in expression. She was willing to believe that he felt more than he cared to show, and his frigid bearing and reluctant greeting were the not unnatural results of past meetings with her brother.

While she made these observations the subject of them seemed to be apologizing to her brother for the failure of some man to keep an appointment at the office. He handed John a letter, which the latter scarcely glanced at. The tone of cool civility in his address, barely veiling an almost insolent indifference and contempt, stirred an antagonism in the older man that lay deeper than the memory of any wrong, real or imagined. He brushed aside the question of the appointment, and broke out with blunt reference to the subject that absorbed his angry thought, the very mention of which his sister dreaded.

"This business of settlement has been dragging on a long time, Mr. Thornton. I should like to have a few words with you on the way things are going."

Cecilia turned a hurried attention to the prospect from the rain-darkened windows while the young man explained, with a cold, elaborate patience his entire dissociation from his father's affairs. He had never been concerned in the business, and the state of things revealed at the latter's death had been as great a shock to himself as to any one. Matters were now in the hands of properly appointed administrators, and all that could be done for Miss Ward's interest——

"I don't feel so sure of that," John broke in bluntly. "What you say of yourself may be quite true, and I'm not blaming you or any one living for what's been done; but I may as well say frankly that I am not satisfied with the attention that is being given to Miss Ward's interest. Here's my sister robbed by your father of every penny that's due to her, and not one of his family has so much as troubled to say they're sorry!"

"John!" pleaded Cecilia softly.

"My regret for the loss Miss Ward has suffered," said young Thornton, with a certain tension of manner, "might surely be taken for granted. No words can be needed to express my sorrow at any injury she has sustained through my father's unfortunate mismanagement of his affairs."

"Unfortunate!" said John, with a snort.

Cecilia felt a craven desire to thrust her fingers in her ears to shut out every sound of what she saw impending. Her brother's long-smouldering resentment was wearing through the thin barrier of self-restraint, and Bernard Thornton's responses, in cool, deliberate, well-modulated accents, were not the soft answers that turn away wrath. He had taken his stand by the fireplace, and, resting his dark, smoothly brushed head on his hand was regarding the older man with a steady gaze from his very handsome dark-grey eyes, in which Cecilia, smarting inwardly, read a cold measureless contempt.

"I should like you to bear in mind, Mr. Ward," he said, as the latter's tones began to rise in angry denunciation, "that in speaking to me in your sister's presence you have me at a disadvantage, and I ask you to choose your expressions more carefully. I admit your injury. But you might remember that my father is dead and can no longer defend or explain his conduct. We don't know to what extent he had authority for his dealing with my aunt's property Because no evidence of any understanding between them has been brought to light we have no right to assume that nothing of the sort existed."

"Mr. Thornton," returned John, with sullen obstinacy, "I'm not blaming you for anything your father was. But when you take that tone of injured

innocence you drive me to speak plainly. You may impose on some people with that tale, but you can't on me. We both know that there is only one word for what your father did, and if he'd lived there is only one thing that could have happened to him. Well, he's dead now, and you're hoping to get the whole matter hushed up, and you're thinking that's going to be the end of it. And I say it isn't—not while my sister is having no sort of justice done her."

"But whom do you expect to do her justice? My father is the only person responsible for the loss your sister suffers. It would be impossible for me to refund the money, or any part of the money that represents my aunt's property. Besides, it isn't required of me. I am in no way answerable for my father's debts."

John's chin was set in its ugliest lines. "That's all very well. Legally, perhaps, you're not responsible. But there is such a thing as an honourable obligation. An honest man, let me tell you, doesn't settle down comfortably for life on the remains of his father's fortune when there are those that father has swindled out of every penny they possess. There's your mother," he went on, as the other made an effort to speak, "living now in a good house in a good neighbourhood, with men-servants and carriages. Does she mean to keep all that and not give up a farthing in reparation to the girl her husband robbed?"

"My mother's money," said the young man, exceedingly stiffly, "is her own and is settled upon her. Her income is not so large as you seem to imagine. It may please you to know that she will have neither carriages nor men-servants in future. If she were to sacrifice the whole to my father's creditors, it wouldn't

satisfy all claims. Your sister would be very little better off than she is at present. And it is a sacrifice nobody can demand and which I, for my part, would never allow."

"Well, we'll see if your mother agrees to that—when she knows everything."

"I don't think I quite understand you," said Bernard Thornton quietly.

"I mean," said John, with heat, "your mother hasn't heard yet the whole story of her husband's death and what led up to it. You've tried to keep the worst parts of the business from her. You'd like her to go on thinking of him as an honest man and an honourable gentleman who met with undeserved misfortunes and a sudden accidental death. You meant to hush up the truth. And you can't do it unless I help you—and I don't see any reason why I should."

Young Thornton put up his eyebrows. "Is this an attempt at blackmail?"

"No, it isn't!" answered John angrily. "I'm not making any demand of you. I only say that my sister's been disgracefully treated among you all, and you want me to hold my tongue about it. And I'm not prepared to do that, and there's no law to make me!"

"I 'm not asking you to hold your tongue," said the other, surveying him with scorn. "When you stoop to utter threats like this you put yourself within reach of the law, and the law must deal with you. But I do say that even in suggesting that you should go out of your way to bring the whole miserable story of my father's private life before his wife, who loved and trusted him, you suggest a dastardly thing!" His eye fell on Cecilia, and he turned to her swiftly:

"Miss Ward, you are the witness of your brother's words. Is it with your approval he makes these threats?"

Startled, by the suddenness of his speech, out of all self-possession, Cecilia stared blankly in his face for one moment.

"It is altogether against my wish," she faltered miserably, but her eyes travelled instinctively, with an unmistakable expression, to her brother's lowering countenance, and she attempted no further speech. She felt the young man's gaze rest on her with a moment's keen scrutiny; then he seemed to turn from her with contemptuous silence. She knew that he dismissed her as a cipher, a tool, a person of no account, and till the end of the interview he bestowed no more attention on her.

For the rest of the time she sat in a silent rage of self-scorn, loathing herself for her unreadiness, her slowness of speech. Why had she not declared boldly how abhorrent to her whole nature was the claim her brother was making; why had she not cut herself off with passionate words from every suggestion of complicity in his bullying threats? In the pitiless clearness of her own self-judgment she saw herself as she must now appear—stupid, awkward, gauche, the dull feminine counterpart of John, meek where he was truculent, silent where he was loud-voiced, but still of the same class, the same lack of breeding, owning the same low standard of conduct.

She sat on her chair as on a rack while the altercation lasted, now hot, now cold, with shame. Every coarse, angry word from her brother, every underbred tone and gesture, every ill-chosen expression seemed to pierce her shrinking soul like red-hot needles run

into her flesh. She contrasted his manner, flushed, flustered, rough-spoken, with the other's glacial calm, the cultured modulations of his voice, the controlled set of his thin-lipped, clear-cut mouth; and in her shame and misery she felt she could have literally crawled out of the office. She laughed at herself afterwards, but at the time she was nearer tears; indeed, that interview between Bernard Thornton and her brother was, to the last day of her life, a memory upon which she never cared to look back.

It did not really last a long time, measured by the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece; but of the time that is measured by heart-beats ages seemed to have passed when the young man suddenly sprang to his feet.

"It can hardly be pleasant for Miss Ward to sit here and listen to our differences. I have borne a good deal, making allowance for some natural indignation, but there are things that even the son of a felon in the dock would be justified in resenting. If you have anything insulting to say of my father or myself that you haven't already said, please come and say it another day, and come alone!"

Cecilia rose quickly, gladly seizing upon even this questionable opening to escape. She never knew whether she herself got John to the door, or whether Mr. Thornton managed it by moral force; but though the latter bowed her out with all courtesy, she had a feeling of being ignominiously thrust out. She hurried impetuously down the stairs, and her brother followed her more slowly and filled the cab as they drove to the station with muttered maledictions, angry threats, and bluster. His own grievance for the moment overshadowed the recollection of his sister's wrong;

he appealed for her sympathy, for her recognition of the insults that had been heaped upon him. "Did you hear him say——" "Did you see what he meant by——" Cecilia, who had seen and heard so much more than he dreamed of, so much that she ached to forget, was spared no single painful memory.

"But I'll let him see that I'm not the man to sit down quietly under his insolence!" he declared at last as they drove into the station-yard. "I may not be able to get your money back for you, Cecilia, but I'll make that infernal young ape alter his tone towards you before I've finished with him."

"But, John," exclaimed his sister in horror, "you only used those threats to Mr. Thornton in anger! You can't really mean——"

"Can't I?" John Ward rejoined, with his ugliest, bulldog expression. "Look here, Cecilia, I don't say what I would have done if that confounded young snob had treated me decently and shown a different spirit towards you; but now I mean every word I said, if I ever meant anything in my life!"

CHAPTER V

A PROPOSAL

THE clouds hung very low over Cecilia's path in the days that followed. The gleam of hope that had brightened her dull life had gone out, leaving nothing but a memory of injury and bitterness behind it. John was in the worst of tempers, Emmeline more than usually plaintive. All the lesser miseries of life that seem to wait for our hours of desolation to harass and torment us, like mosquitoes coming out to sting in the dark, thronged upon her now. Marcus Aurelius could not cheer her, travellers' tales only deepened the burden of regret.

The first break in the monotonous canopy of gloom came with a letter she received from a Mr. Mallory, a solicitor of Lincoln's Inn Fields, writing on behalf of the relations, or a relation, of the late Mr. Francis Thornton, politely desiring her, if convenient, to call at his office that day. His client, the lawyer said, wished to submit a certain matter to her consideration, and, as it was one that concerned herself entirely, begged that she would come unaccompanied by her brother, Mr. John Ward.

"It's fortunate that John is away from home," said Cecilia, handing the letter across the table to her sister-in-law. "He would never have let me go

without him. Will you come with me, Emmeline, or shall I go alone?"

Emmeline was aghast at the idea of either course, or, indeed, of taking any steps at all without her lord's approval. But as it was quite impossible under the circumstances to consult John, and as to her mind, as to that of many women of a similar cast, a solicitor's letter had all the weight of a papal decree, she decided, as the lesser evil, that her sister-in-law might go alone. "It isn't as if you were so very young," she pointed out. And Cecilia agreed it was not.

Having thus freed herself from any charge of complicity in her sister-in-law's unauthorized doings, she inclined to take a more sanguine view of the situation. All along she had cherished a baseless feminine hope that the lawyers, "or somebody," might "do something" for Cecilia. Here were her hopes taking shape.

Cecilia, however, looked troubled as she put the letter back in its envelope. "I wish I knew what John has been doing," she said uneasily, " or what he has threatened the Thorntons to do. They are evidently afraid of something. They want me to stop him."

"But you can't do anything," protested Emmeline blankly.

"No," said Cecilia bitterly, "I can't. But they don't know that. Some women could. Some brothers might be more manageable than John, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that in a matter that concerns me so nearly my words might have some influence. I just have to show them what sort of a woman I am, and what sort of a man John is, and to convince them that I am as powerless as they are to prevent my

brother making mischief if he chooses to do so. The interview can't be pleasant, but I expect it will be brief. You will see me home to lunch."

"I don't know what John will say when he hears of it," murmured Emmeline.

It was not raining for this journey. It was a bitter, grey, sunless day, with a biting east wind. Cecilia was sensitive to cold, and it did not suit her. The glimpses she caught of herself in the glass of the cab as she sped towards her destination did not send her to her ordeal with any elation of spirit. To punish herself for having so much as noticed Bernard Thornton's good looks on a former occasion—for she held that an austere indifference to the other sex, especially the more interesting members of it, was the only attitude self-respect made possible to a plain woman,—to get rid of the uncomfortable suspicion that her bitter mortification on that day had been in any way increased by the fact of them, she had donned to-day, as a disciplinary measure, her second-best coat and skirt and least becoming hat.

"You know it doesn't really matter in the least what you wear, you idiotic person!" she assured herself in the glass before she left home. "At your best you can't look anything but plain. Far better be ugly outright and enjoy the calm and settled assurance that comes with hopeless ugliness."

But it was with no calm, settled assurance of mind she made her way up the lawyer's stairs, and she was more relieved than she cared to own when, on entering the office, she found that Bernard Thornton was not there. Mr. Mallory himself received her. He was not disconcertingly young and handsome, or chillingly superior. He was grey and elderly, and apart

from a certain professional stiffness not unkindly in manner.

He touched with some reserve on the object of her visit. As a personal friend of Francis Thornton and his family he spoke of his charming social qualities, and alluded feelingly to the tragedy in which his life had ended. His veiled references to the quarrel between Francis Thornton's son and John Ward seemed to treat the matter lightly, as a mere family dispute. Bernard had a difficult temper, he said, using the young man's Christian name as if he spoke to one member of the family of another, and he had been very much tried by recent events. It would be very deplorable if some unguarded expression, let fall in anger, should cause any action to be taken which would involve serious consequences and occasion much distress in every quarter. It was because he felt that a little open discussion of the circumstances might relieve strained feeling and lead to a satisfactory adjustment of the situation that his client, Mr. St. George, had desired an interview with her.

"Mr. St. George!" repeated Cecilia, puzzled.

"Ah, you have never met my client, I believe?"

"I have never heard of him."

"Indeed! Not Mr. Harry St. George, the stepson of the late Mr. Thornton? To be sure, he is not often in England. He is a great traveller. In fact, he is on the point now of starting on a journey to Central Africa. That is why he was anxious for the interview to take place with as little delay as possible."

"Mr. St. George—the explorer! Oh, I have heard of him," exclaimed Cecilia.

"Really!" The lawyer's tone showed more than conventional surprise. "I was not aware that he

had any public reputation as an explorer. He travels simply for his own amusement. He is a man of independent means. I may say that he is absolutely unconcerned with Mr. Francis Thornton's business affairs, and, of course, has not the least responsibility in the matter. It is only as his mother is involved in a settlement of the case that he comes forward now."

"And he wishes to speak to me?" said the girl, dismayed. This was a prospect more alarming than another interview with the handsome, supercilious Bernard. She had come across the mention of St. George a short time before in an unpretending little book of travel in Western Siberia. The writer had referred in his preface to his friend, Mr. St. George, though the latter had only appeared in the narrative as St. G. The book had interested Cecilia, and the figure of St. G., who seemed a cool, adventurous person, had assumed almost an heroic aspect in her eyes. But to persons of diffident temperament the prospect of meeting their heroes in the flesh is rarely one of unalloyed pleasure. And to appear before this hero as a grasping, mercenary young woman, who was to be warned off, bought off, threatened!—it was a revolting idea! She had a mind to refuse to meet him and to flee incontinently from the office.

"Quite a short interview," said the lawyer, reading her look of dismay; "nothing of an unpleasant nature. Mr. St. George has deep sympathy with you in the unfortunate position of affairs. He is anxious to meet you as a friend." He glanced at the clock. "I am expecting him every minute. It is already past the time fixed, but I never knew my client to be quite punctual to an appointment yet. He is an Irishman,"

he added, with a sudden little smile of friendly indulgence for the absent St. George, "though certainly his name has a particularly English ring. Ah, I think I hear him."

He excused himself and disappeared into the outer room, leaving Cecilia a prey to the wildest apprehension. The calm and settled assurance that was to have been conferred by her consciousness of unredeemed ugliness altogether failed her, though she was quite convinced that she had never looked uglier in her life. But it was not now her looks that troubled her, or so she told herself, it was the character in which she was forced to appear. Her merciless faculty for seeing things as other people saw them, and herself as the least friendly critics must judge her, made her feel for the moment the sordid, second-rate, and unscrupulous young person, lending herself to an infamous attempt to extort money, which was the only light in which the family and friends of the late Francis Thornton could possibly regard her.

She heard the voice of the man she was to interview in the outer office—a deep voice, rather harsh, but not unpleasing in tone, with the suggestion of an Irish accent, very different in sound from the clear, smooth, well-modulated accents of his half-brother.

"You're a little late, Harry," said Mr. Mallory in friendly expostulation.

"Am I, indeed? Why, I thought I was rather early."

The other laughed; there were a few minutes of low-toned conversation, then the lawyer re-entered the room, and his client, who seemed to be an unceremonious person, lounged in carelessly after him, his hands in his pockets.

"Miss Ward, may I introduce to you Mr. St. George?"

Mr. St. George took his hands out of his pockets and bowed. Cecilia, as she confusedly returned his greeting, had time to draw a swift comparison between the newcomer and his brother. He was, apparently, some half-dozen years older, and, in every sense, a man of larger make. His appearance was distinctly less well-groomed, and his dress was careless. His features were of a bolder type, and not so regular; his hair, in contrast to his brother's smoothly-brushed locks, was rough and curly; his mouth was not so thin-lipped, but was marked by lines of somewhat sardonic humour. There was a wash of tan over his face, but his natural complexion seemed pale.

"This is not quite my first meeting with Miss Ward," he said, fixing his gaze upon her. "We encountered one another on the stairs at Thornton's office the other morning."

Cecilia struggled valiantly to return his glance with tranquil self-possession, but the man's personality was not one to set her at her ease; the glance of his keen, light-grey eyes was oddly disconcerting to her. Oh, for the quiet dignity of Celia! the easy frankness of Cecil!

"I don't remember—I don't think I saw you."

The words fell awkwardly from her lips, and she blushed as she spoke. With her horror and disgust at the untimely demonstration fled her last hope of sustaining the conversation in a worthy manner. Celia and Cecil vanished from that moment; for the rest of the interview she was Cecilia, awkward, tongue-tied, gauche—Cecilia at her worst!

"Ah, I saw you," said St. George. He looked

away for the moment as he saw his glance embarrassed her, and dismissed the lawyer with a friendly little nod. He did not say that it was that brief glance he had caught of her on the stairs, the impression flashed upon him of her pitiful shrinking and dread, contrasted with her brother's assertion, that was responsible for their present meeting. "Don't be frightened, Miss Ward, I am not going to challenge you to single combat." ("St. George and the dragon!" said Cecilia to herself, with grim humour. "It is not surprising that the idea should occur to him!") "I only thought it might be a good thing for us to talk this business over as friends—or mightn't we say relations? We are remote sort of cousins, aren't we?"

By a frantic struggle Cecilia had managed to regain a measure of stiff, constrained composure.

"Mrs. Palmer was my second cousin once removed," she said, endeavouring to speak calmly and naturally, and only succeeding in divesting her voice of any expression whatever. "And your stepfather was her nephew by marriage."

"And you don't think that constitutes a relationship? Well, perhaps not. It's a pity, though, as we may have occasion to speak of our respective relations pretty frankly. One can go for the members of one's own family so much more comfortably than for outsiders. But I suppose you don't want to saddle yourself with too many shady connections."

His voice was grave and he turned a serious face towards her. "Oh, it isn't that!" cried Cecilia unwarily, and the next moment saw that she had taken his jest for earnest. "*Imbecile!*" she reviled herself in disgust and vexation. But her face remained outwardly set as before.

St. George took a few turns up and down the room. Then he came towards the window where Cecilia sat.

"May I talk this matter over with you, Miss Ward?" He drew a chair towards him with his foot, and seated himself in the careless, casual manner that marked all his movements. "In the first place I want to tell you what I think no member of my family has troubled to say to you yet—that I think you have been abominably treated, and to express my deep regret and sympathy with you. That being settled, let us discuss the business in a calm, unprejudiced fashion. I know what you must feel about it, and you can guess what a man with any honesty or decency might feel in my place. I ask you to believe me sufficiently honest and decent to have those feelings. But no amount of talking will mend matters now, and calling names won't help us much. The only thing is to try somehow to make the best of things as they are—as my poor devil of a stepfather left them."

He was silent for some minutes, staring straight before him, his eyes fixed absently on the dreary outlook visible from the window, his hands in his pockets, his mouth twisted to a one-sided smile. Cecilia guessed that his thoughts were busy with the tragedy of his "poor devil of a stepfather," and hesitated to speak. The silence became oppressive.

"It is good of you to trouble," she began, and stopped uncertainly. She was not sure whether he intended any benefit to her by his interference, whether her acknowledgment of his goodness was not misplaced. "I think the best thing to do now," she went on, hurriedly and awkwardly, "is to let things be as they are."

He turned to her with a sudden smile. "That's

the easiest thing, usually. The only objection here is that it can't be done. Some step will have to be taken. If we don't do something your brother will."

Cecilia winced, and a slow, painful flush mounted to her forehead. All the burning shame of that miserable scene with Bernard Thornton swept over her. "John—my brother does not mean," she faltered, with an effort—it had seemed so easy at home to show "what sort of a man John was," it was so terribly difficult here and now, to this man of another stamp— "I don't think he would really want to do any harm. But he thinks a wrong has been done——"

"He could scarcely think otherwise," said St. George gravely. "No man could expect him to take such an injury lightly. He has every right to be angry on your account. The only thing I find questionable is the way he proposes to repair the wrong. You know, Miss Ward, by letting the whole story come to my mother's ears he can do no possible good—he can only cause the greatest pain and distress."

"I know," she said miserably. "I mean, I am sure you are right. But I can't prevent him doing anything that he wants to do."

"My mother's money," St. George continued steadily, "what there is left her, is settled upon her—absolutely. No creditor of my stepfather's can compel her to disburse a fraction of it."

"I know."

"It isn't justice, perhaps, but it is the law, and it is the law that will settle the matter. My mother, in her business affairs, so far as she understands them, is the soul of honour. She wouldn't cheat one of her tradesmen of a halfpenny put down wrong in his account. But in a matter of importance like this she

will be guided entirely by my brother, and he will not allow her to give up a farthing. Nothing that I can say will influence her in the smallest degree. Her ignorance of affairs is abysmal. She believes implicitly what my brother Bernard tells her, and he will see that she keeps all that the law allows her to keep. You may take my word for it."

"Oh, I know all that," cried the girl desperately. "I understand perfectly how it is. Do you think I don't see what a monstrous thing it is my brother proposes? Do you believe I want to take your mother's money?"

"It would be very natural, under the circumstances," he went on, calmly ignoring her vehemence, "for you to feel that the money was yours and not my mother's at all. In strict justice it is, perhaps—at least, ten thousand pounds of it. But my brother will abide by the law, and so, in the end, your brother will have to do. In the meantime there is no denying he can make things deuced unpleasant—" He broke off abruptly, and fixed one of his straight, disconcerting glances upon her. "Look here," he said bluntly, "if I were conducting this business in the proper diplomatic fashion, I should tell you that your brother by speaking out now, after all that has been said, can only injure himself and do us no harm at all; but I don't mind telling you quite frankly that he can harm us a great deal. I needn't go into the whole story with you—there are sides of it, perhaps, that you've never even heard of—but it is a fact that things have got so tangled up that my mother's peace of mind, from now till the end of her life, depends on your brother's holding his tongue, and there's nothing but common humanity and common decency

—I beg your pardon if I speak too strongly—to make him do it. Now, as I have shown, by telling the truth he can break my mother's heart—he can get that satisfaction—but he can get no other. Do you honestly think the game's worth the candle? I can't expect you—either of you—to be influenced by any particular consideration for my mother's feelings, but when you see the uselessness of hurting her—don't you think you might persuade your brother——"

"Mr. St. George," said Cecilia, breathlessly, "the uselessness is in thinking that anything I say or do will influence my brother. I don't think John has ever been guided by any one's opinion or advice in his life. Certainly not by any woman's, and least of all by mine. He will pay no attention to anything I say. I told him from the first in the strongest language I could find that I would have nothing to do with any attempt to make you pay for his silence, that I would never touch a farthing of any money if he wrung it from you, and he—he——"

"He called you a fool for your pains?"

"Yes, he called me a fool. But he said more than that. He is very angry. It is not only the money he is thinking of now. He quarrelled with your brother and he thinks he has been insulted, and he is determined to do the worst he can in revenge. I think he will be sorry afterwards when he has done it; he is not really bad at heart. But he is furious now, and quite set on his purpose. Nothing will make him give it up! Nothing!" She paused, panting for breath, partly from the vehemence with which she had spoken, partly from fright at having made so long a speech.

"So that road's blocked," said the man. "We must try to find some other way out."

He sprang to his feet and paced the room in silence for some minutes. The girl sat miserable and ill at ease, stroking and smoothing her muff for want of something better to do. All her life afterwards the smell of bear fur gave her a faint, vague sense of discomfort and depression, bringing back to her mind those painful and disturbing moments. If she had known what was passing in the man's mind, those moments would have been even more painful and weighted with a heavier significance.

St. George came back to his chair presently, and seating himself astride it folded his arms on the bar. His face was very grave and curiously set, as if with a stir of feeling beneath the gravity; there was a gleam of some untranslatable expression in his eyes.

"Miss Ward," he said, smiling a little, "I am going to put you through a catechism. I hope you'll do me the justice to believe that not a question I ask you is prompted by mere idle curiosity. I should like you to understand that I have your welfare seriously at heart"— his lips took a sudden twist of amusement. "Sounds a little pompous and platformy, doesn't it? But put it how you like, I mean you nothing but good. You trust me for that, eh?"

His light grey eyes were fixed on her, keenly, searchingly, but not unkindly.

"Yes," murmured Cecilia.

She was pitiably nervous. Her hands shook, and she clasped them inside her muff that their trembling might not be seen. Inwardly, she was clenching her teeth and saying to herself, "Fool! Fool! Fool!" But no determination could keep her breathing even or prevent her heart beating quickly and painfully. She knew St. George could not fail to notice her agita-

tion—he must think her an idiot—mad! Her fierce effort at composure drove the blood from her cheek and made her lips rigid. Her answers came in awkward jerks.

"First of all, I should like to tell you that you are not altogether unknown to me. An old nurse of mine, Mary O'Gorman, went into service in your cousin Mrs. Palmer's house, and met you there as a child. When I visited her in her last illness she sometimes spoke of you, and afterwards, when I heard your name in connection with my stepfather's affairs, I remembered it. I understand you have been living with your brother ever since, and you are entirely dependent on him?"

"Yes."

"And you have known of your godmother's legacy for a long time?"

"For years."

"You wanted it very much? You looked forward to getting it?"

"I tried not to."

"Of course. We none of us like to wish too eagerly for anything that can only come to us through some other person's death, but still—well, look here, Miss Ward, we may as well be honest. We're not millionaires. Ten thousand pounds is ten thousand pounds; we can't afford to despise it. You wanted that money?"

"Yes," said Cecilia. "I wanted it desperately. I lived for it. It meant so much to me."

"Exactly." He nodded and was silent. "You live in the suburbs?" was his next question, abruptly put.

"Yes." She mentioned the name of her suburb.

"Ah, to be sure. On the Chatham and Dover, isn't it? You like it? Not the Chatham and Dover, of course—your suburb?"

She shook her head.

"I remember it," said St. George meditatively. "I called on some friends there once. It didn't seem to me half a bad little place."

"It isn't half a bad little place for an afternoon call," said the girl dryly. "But I have lived there for twenty-five years."

She wondered if the sympathy and understanding of which he showed some gleams would enable him to grasp the idea that what would have been so intolerable to him was barely endurable to her. But he took her statement calmly enough.

"You must have a great many friends there."

"Hardly any," she said briefly. "I know people of course, and visit them, but I couldn't call them anything but acquaintances."

"You don't entertain very much?"

"No. You have seen my brother, and you have seen me. You haven't seen my sister-in-law, but I can tell you she is just the kind of person you might expect John's wife to be. Do you think we are the sort of people to gather a large and interesting circle of friends about us?"

She blurted out her words with the sudden impulse of the naturally reticent toward self-revelation. St. George made no comment. He continued his questions with the studied detachment of a physician or examining counsel.

"You get a lot of theatres and concerts, I suppose, living so near London?"

"My brother does not care for music," said the

girl concisely. "And he doesn't consider the theatre a diversion for grown-up people."

"You read a good deal, I dare say?"

"Oh, yes, I read!" dryly. "It is a cheap amusement."

"H'm! Novels? Poetry? Biographies, perhaps?"

"I read anything and everything. But I prefer Travels."

For the first time he showed a touch of surprise, as if he had not received quite the answer he expected. But he did not pursue the subject. "Ah, Travels! they must be very interesting—to read about," he said dryly.

Cecilia felt vaguely snubbed. She wondered, with her usual instinct for fastening on any possibility of self-torment, if he saw in this avowed preference an attempt to engage his interest. She was still wondering when his next question fell on her ear.

"You are not engaged to be married, Miss Ward?"

His tone was more than ever the detached, impersonal one of a physician asking intimate questions. Cecilia was furious with herself for the blush which she could not restrain as she gave the briefest of negatives.

"Are you likely to be? Forgive me, this must seem astounding impertinence—I mean, is there any understanding, any attachment? Are your thoughts at all disposed towards matrimony?"

"No," said Cecilia bluntly, "nothing is further from them. It is of all things most unlikely."

He gave her a quick, keen glance, that took in every detail of her appearance. Plain, awkward, ill-dressed, morbidly shy and sensitive. No, he did not think, without the attraction of her ten thousand

pounds, she was at all likely to marry. Not likely, perhaps, to have married with it, or to have been happy if she had. Would a woman so shrinkingly sensitive and self-distrustful, yet not without pride—so far as his intuition went it read her character very accurately—be happy with the kind of man who would marry her for such a sum? As well, perhaps, for her after all that her legacy had been lost.

"In that case," he said deliberately, "I mean, if you really have no thought of anything of the kind, I wonder how it would be if you were to marry me."

Cecilia started impulsively to her feet. Her muff dropped to the ground. She took a step forward with a vague idea of getting away from this madman. Then with habitual self-distrust she decided that she must have misunderstood his words. He could never mean what it sounded as if he had meant. She stood rooted to the spot, her colour coming and going, her eyes fixed on him, wide open with fright.

St. George picked up the muff and handed it back to her with unshaken calm.

"Please sit down," he said reassuringly, "and don't look round for your brother to kick me out of the room. I am not mad, or drunk, and I haven't the remotest intention of insulting you. The proposition is startling, of course, coming from a man you haven't known for an hour. I might have led up to it gradually, but as time is limited I thought it might be as well to give you the idea first and let you get a bit used to it while I went in for apologies and explanations. You understand that, of course, I mean a purely business arrangement. Just the ceremony of marriage, and absolute freedom for both of us afterwards. You see, the matter stands in this way.

A great wrong has been done you by—well, by a connection of mine——"

"By no one for whom you are responsible," said Cecilia hoarsely. She had seated herself again. The man was not mad; the question was to be argued out. She would have wished to do it calmly and dispassionately as St. George himself; but she felt herself trembling from head to foot; she could not control her voice. "The wrong was none of your doing. Why should you concern yourself about it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, my mother happens to be living on the money of the man who wronged you out of yours. Doesn't that give you some sort of a claim on me? Besides, if we let things go on as they are, my mother may have to know that her husband was a scoundrel, and—well, it's a bit out of date, perhaps, to talk of broken hearts, but the knowledge would cut her up rather severely. She's very frail; I shouldn't like to say the shock might not kill her. You see, Miss Ward, though the man was a scamp to you, though he was a bit of a scamp in more ways than one, he was good to her so far as she knew him, and she loved him. It is difficult, perhaps, to you to think that there could be anything lovable about a chap like that; but there was. I was fond of him myself, and he was a good friend to me in many ways." He stood looking out of the window, his hands in his pockets. "Gad! we are queer truck! It seems as if the Almighty packed us up as a schoolboy packs his trunk, good, bad, and indifferent rammed in anyhow, and it's just a chance what our shaking and jolting through the world brings to the top. We none of us know what sort of a saint or sinner we may die, if we live long enough. It's a great pity for

himself and everybody else that Frank Thornton didn't go out ten years ago." He stood for some moments in musing silence, staring out of the window. "But that is neither here nor there," he went on, turning with a sudden change of manner. "The thing is, as I say, a great wrong has been done you, and I feel a sort of responsibility on me to set it right."

"But why?" asked Cecilia bluntly. "I am not the only one who was wronged."

"That's true; and I don't propose to shoulder the whole of my stepfather's debts. The other legatees, I'm afraid, must look out for themselves. I know them both, and it won't hurt either of them to lose a little money. But yours is a different case, and Thornton himself felt that. He spoke to me about it, though not knowing the state of affairs I didn't understand at the time what the poor chap was hinting at. It weighed on his mind at the last. I told you he was a good friend to me once; he helped me when I was set on making the worst possible mess of my life. I should like to feel I had paid him back by helping to clear up some of his muddles. The question is, how it can be done. I must ask you to listen to me while I put the case in a businesslike way before you. As a boy I was notoriously incapable of keeping money by me. The income that I have at present was left me by an uncle who appreciated that feature in my character. It is so strictly tied up that I can't touch a penny of the capital while I live, or leave it to any one I like at my death. If I die unmarried and without natural heirs, the whole of it goes to my brother Bernard. And he would take it, every penny of it. My brother believes that if you don't look after your own interests in this world nobody else is going to

undertake the job for you, and he gives his whole mind to the business. He isn't a bad chap in some respects, but we all have our ways of looking at life, and that's his. So you see it is no use thinking of making any provision for you in my will. I am afraid it is no use to try raising a loan or insuring my life in your favour. This business of mine in Central Africa simply bristles with dangers; in the eyes of half my acquaintances I'm already a dead man. They are all wrong. I feel it in my bones that I'm going to come through all right. But you can't expect an unimaginative body like an insurance company to take the feeling in my bones as any security. Well, there, I don't want to bore you with unnecessary details, but I want to make you see that by far the quickest and simplest way of insuring your income for life is to go through a form of marriage with me before I leave England. Then you get the interest on your ten thousand pounds as long as I live, and when I die you get considerably more. Don't you think that would satisfy your brother?"

He turned to her abruptly. Cecilia was so breathless from his rapid speaking and the extraordinary ideas presented to her that it was some moments before she could reply.

"I don't understand," she said slowly. "Is your reason for this—this proposal"—she blushed and blundered over the word, hating the sound of it—"to give me some of your money, or to spare your stepfather's memory?"

"It is both," he said, with a sudden smile. "Don't you think two middling good reasons for doing a thing are equal to one really excellent one?"

"No," said the girl, with sudden resolution; "I

think for marriage one wants one very excellent reason, and there is no such thing here." She suddenly stood up. "You mustn't think," she said, dropping her eyes with a return of her former awkward embarrassment, "that I don't see how kind, how extraordinarily generous, your suggestion is, and am not grateful for it. But the thing is quite preposterous and out of the question. I could never agree to it."

"But why? Tell me your objection. The marriage is the merest form. I am not proposing to interfere with your liberty in the smallest degree. I will bind myself by any oaths you like never to annoy you in any way."

"Oh, of course," breathlessly, "I quite understand. That isn't necessary."

"Surely it is possible for two sensible people to lead their own lives in comfort in spite of a purely nominal bond between them. You are absolutely free. I suppose it would be better to take my name, but that will only make you freer in your actions than you would be as a single girl; it leaves you with no responsibility towards me. You can go where you please and do what you like; I shall never dream of interfering with you. You will have between four and five hundred a year to live on—I suppose you had reckoned on getting five per cent. for your money; women always do. It isn't riches, but for a single woman it will serve. You can travel—Cook's Tours, and that sort of thing; they do these things very cheaply nowadays. You've never been abroad, I think you said. You would like to do Europe, I suppose, Rome and Venice, and then Japan and India, the Taj Mahal, and the rest of it? Well, I'm told even that might be done with management. Or, if

you prefer it, a flat with a friend, not too far out of town, with concerts and picture-galleries and lectures —or a cottage in the country, with pigs and poultry— it's just as your taste inclines. The only objection I can see," he added, more slowly, "is that you might by chance want to marry some day, and certainly I should be an obstacle. You can't play tricks with the marriage service without a certain amount of risk. But in that case—we might see. Perhaps without making things too unpleasant for you I might manage a divorce."

"Please don't!" cried Cecilia. "I mean"—hurriedly—"don't speak of such a thing. I am not going to marry you. Nothing would make me accept such a sacrifice."

"There's not much sacrifice about it." He stuck his hands into his pockets once more and walked to the window. "I'm not a marrying man. I was never cut out for a husband and father of a family. The delights of domesticity never did appeal to me. I'm a wanderer and a vagabond. I like to feel that any day I please I can shake myself free of the whole rotten business of civilization. I couldn't stand any tie that bound me for good to my own hearthstone— not as long as there's a corner of the world for me still to see. One of these days, I suppose, I shall leave my bones at the bottom of some mountain pass or bleaching in the desert. It is all one to me; I shall have had my day. But if I don't—if I live through all the dangers, and, full of years and rheumatism, bring my worn-out old carcass back to England"—he paused, contemplating this picture with his eyes wide and fixed—"no, still I shouldn't want a wife. Comfortable bachelor quarters, with a good man to look after

me, and a club round the corner where I could toddle off every day and spin yarns with the other old fellows —that would be all I should want. There's no place for a woman—for a wife—in my life."

"But you don't know—perhaps some day—people often find themselves wanting something they never expected to want. You might meet some one—" she coloured uncomfortably over the sentimental bog in which she was floundering. "One never knows—one has to consider possibilities."

"I don't think so. If we stopped to consider all possibilities, how would anything in the world get settled? It's a possible thing that any one of us may go mad at any moment of our lives, but we all arrange our affairs on the supposition that we shall retain the average amount of sanity. I can't swear that what you suggest is out of the question, but I should say that it was most unlikely. Of course, the possibility exists equally in your own case, and if you are afraid——"

"Oh, no, I should not think of that for myself. I have not the least desire to marry."

"Well, I can't see myself, and never could, any great attraction in the married state; the odds are all on your being happier single—" He pulled himself up abruptly, and a queer contraction crossed his face. It suddenly occurred to him that he was pressing these views on the woman he was asking to marry him, and he smiled inwardly. Cecilia saw the humour of it, too; but she did not smile—at least, not then.

"There is one other side of the question I must point out to you," he continued, after a moment; "and that is that even the shadow of a bond I am suggesting may not last more than a few months, or

years at the outside. I told you that I felt in my bones that I shouldn't be knocked over in this business; but I'm bound to confess the chances are ninety to one against it; and if it doesn't happen to me in this affair it may in the next. I don't bear a charmed life."

"If you mean that I am to marry you hoping for your death," said Cecilia, fastening her fur, "I think that is an additional reason against the marriage. An arrangement that made one so inhuman as that couldn't be a right one."

"Well, we needn't put it quite so baldly as that," said St. George, watching her gravely, "if you don't think it sounds well."

"What difference does it make how you put things?"

"Why, all the difference in the world. What is it distinguishes us from the brutes but the power of dressing up the facts of life and hiding their ugliness? Believe me, all the art of life depends upon putting things one way rather than another. I had hoped to be able to present this business of our marriage to you in such a way——"

"No," said Cecilia, smoothing her muff with trembling fingers, "it isn't possible. There is no way of putting it that would make me think it right."

"Well, won't you at least consider it? Talk it over with Mallory. He's an unprejudiced person. If you've any doubt of my motives in the matter, which, all things considered, wouldn't be unnatural, I believe he would reassure you. And he knows my history and circumstances. He can tell you that I'm not an adventurer or an impostor. I've never done anything criminal so far as he knows, and I haven't got another

wife. Consult him about it, and think it over, and let me have your decision"—he paused for a moment —"about this time to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" echoed Cecilia aghast.

He looked at her with the little twist of the lips that on most occasions seemed to do duty for a smile.

"You think that too soon? Well, I might allow you twenty-four hours longer. But, you see, my dear Miss Ward, the case doesn't allow of much delay. I am leaving England at the beginning of next week. If we don't make up our minds at once, the whole business is off. Besides, what's the use of taking time to consider? Do you suppose anybody in their lives ever made a wise decision by taking their time over it? We call our actions wise if they turn out well, and foolish if they don't; yet it wasn't our thinking beforehand that made them the one or the other, but a hundred converging circumstances that nobody could possibly foresee. We leap in the dark whatever we do, and we talk about taking time to consider as if we had omniscient wisdom to draw upon. If I give you a month to weigh the pros and cons of the matter, do you think you will be better able to make a wise decision? You'll only muddle your brains thirty times more than if you'd settle the question in a day; and otherwise it won't make a hap'orth of difference. But, of course, if there is any one you would like to consult——"

"No," said Cecilia, moving to the door, "there is no one. And I do not really need time to consider my answer. I can give it to you now, and it is quite final. I could never consent to such a marriage."

"Then your brother must do his worst!"

She was silent.

"I'll wait the thirty-six hours," said St. George, smiling slightly. "Here is my card. You can wire me at my club any time before midnight on Thursday. A word will do—yes or no."

"It will be no," said Cecilia.

CHAPTER VI

HASTE TO THE WEDDING

IT was at Charing Cross station that Cecilia came in a measure to herself.

How she had reached that point in safety she never had the vaguest idea. There was a dim memory in her mind of refusing a taxicab, the agitation of her spirit inclining her to physical exercise. She thought she must have spent a considerable time wandering about the intricacies of Lincoln's Inn and unrecognized streets at the back of the Law Courts, and supposed that some subconscious self guided her steps in the right direction at last, carried her unscathed through the thundering traffic of the Strand, and landed her at her destination; but she had no clear idea of the process. She was too much excited, however, to scold herself as severely as usual for being so thrown off her balance. The thing that had happened to her was so extraordinary that even Cecil might have felt some amazement, and Celia lost something of her tranquil calm.

In waiting for her train at the station the wonder gradually grew less. The spectacle of life, as seen at any great London terminus, had always tended to bring her mind to a philosophic detachment. The countless shifting threads of human destiny meeting and crossing before her eyes made her own joys and

no social question to any higher tribunal; what Mrs. Orville-Grant approved she would have upheld as the proper thing in the face of duchesses.

This caller had arrived at Braeside at an unfashionably early hour; for she had engaged a carriage for the afternoon, and naturally wishing to compress as many visits as possible into the time at her disposal, made her first descent on those of her acquaintance who were of least social importance, and would be so pleased to see her at all that they would not resent seeing her too early. She was not unreasonably annoyed at the appearance of Cecilia, for she had just decided that with a few farewell sentences her brief call might serve as a full-length visit, and Emmeline inconsiderately introduced her sister-in-law's journey to town as a fresh topic of conversation; but she had too much old-fashioned breeding to allow her vexation to appear. Her daughter—a girl of a striking, rather insolent, type of beauty—made no attempt to conceal hers. She barely troubled to listen to the newcomer's forced civilities, returned brief inattentive answers when her mother attempted to draw her into the conversation, and stood for the most part in obvious boredom and impatience, playing with her handsome furs and staring with studied disparagement at every detail of the other girl's attire.

Cecilia, tired, cold, hungry—for in her agitation of mind she had quite forgotten her lunch—had never felt herself less fitted to sustain such an encounter. When the door closed at last on the mother and daughter she sank exhausted into a chair by the fire, her strongest feeling a grovelling regret that she had ever been born.

"Well," said Emmeline, rustling back to the

chesterfield on the other side of the fire with an aroma of "manner" still hovering about her bearing, and the society pitch of her voice not quite relaxed to the common note of familiar intercourse, "had Mr. Thornton's people any proposal to make?"

"Proposal!" repeated Cecilia blankly. Suddenly, in the act of drawing off her gloves, she began to laugh, and at the sight of the other's bewildered consternation laughed more and more—uncontrollably, till the tears came and she hid her face against the cushions of her chair to conceal them. "For pity's sake, Emmeline," she gasped, sitting up at last and scrubbing her eyes with her handkerchief, "give me some tea, and don't speak to me! I forgot to get any lunch and I think I'm rather tired. Yes, they had a proposal to make, but it was one I couldn't possibly accept, and, if you love me, don't say another word about it to-day or I believe I shall have hysterics!"

This was asking rather much of Emmeline, but to the extent of her powers she complied with the unreasonable request. Mrs. Orville-Grant's visit had provided some pleasing items of gossip: it had been suggested that she herself should be a stallholder at a forthcoming bazaar. These were matters of moment; Cecilia's affairs were too hopeless to be important, and whatever she chose to keep to herself concerning them now, a full confession was inevitable when John returned.

The atmosphere of the house was one of peace and quiet, owing to the absence of its master. Cecilia appreciated that blessing, but Emmeline, after the inexplicable habit of wives, rather seemed to miss the disturbing presence. She kept looking at the clock and wondering where John was at that moment, and

what he was doing. His sister, unable to pretend to much interest in the matter, sat down at the piano after dinner and played. It seemed that some subtle undercurrent of excitement in her blood gave her fingers unwonted power and assurance. Even Mrs. Ward looked up in surprise as the triumphal chords of the bridal music from *Lohengrin* sounded loud and exultant through the room.

"What a pity it is you don't always play like that, Cecilia," she said.

Emmeline's compliments were always comparative, and usually had a backward kick. As a rule nothing depressed Cecilia more than to receive one of them. The impression they left on her mind was never that she had looked or done well at the particular time mentioned, but that she had looked or done very ill on a number of other occasions when her sister-in-law had been too tactful to mention it. This time, however, she did not hear the remark and was not hurt by it. She sat with her hands resting on the keys. There was an unusual stir and colour in her face. Emmeline thought for the moment she was almost pretty, and was on the point of telling her how much better her old dinner blouse suited her than her new one, and how much nicer she looked now than when she had come into the room and met the Orville-Grants, when Cecilia broke out:

"I wonder if anybody really feels as glad and exultant as that on their wedding-day. And I should like to know how that music sounds to you when—when you are selling your birthright for a mess of pottage."

After some consideration Mrs. Ward perceived that her sister was referring to the last piece of music

she had played, which, it dawned upon her, had been a wedding march.

"I should think any music sounds a mockery—even *The Voice that breathed o'er Eden*," she said severely, "when a girl is marrying for money."

She felt justified in speaking with severity; she herself had married John "for love." He was the only man who had ever asked her, and the weeks of pleasurable excitement in the fact of being engaged like other girls which had preceded her marriage she was accustomed to look back upon as her golden time of romance.

"I suppose," Cecilia continued, fingering the keys soundlessly, "you fix your mind very hard on the mess of pottage, and remember how you would certainly have starved without it. That would be the sensible thing to do, wouldn't it, Emmeline? And when your birthright is nothing really but a shadowy title to something you will never have——"

"I really don't understand what you are talking about," said Emmeline, yawning genteelly, and taking up the *Queen*.

Cecilia laughed a little. "I know you don't, that's why I say it." She had often thought it a deprivation that she had no one near her who "understood," but undoubtedly there were times when it was a blessing. She was glad that her miserable disquiet and indecision of mind should not be laid bare before eyes which affection had made keen.

Quite early in the evening she went to her own room. As she passed through the hall she caught sight of Mrs. Orville-Grant's card lying on the top of the tray. Through all the hours of weary questioning and vacillation that kept her wakeful in her bed that lit-

tle slip of pasteboard was never without its weight. Long afterwards she confessed with shame the share Miss Orville-Grant had had in making that fantastic, unheard-of marriage arrangement with Harry St. George seem a possible thing.

When she fell asleep at last it seemed possible, only because she could not bear the thought of her life as it would be if the scheme were dismissed; but the little imps that dig and delve in our brains whilst we lie passive in slumber, undermining our firmest resolutions, revealing unsuspected sides of questions we thought comfortably settled, and working unseen a complete revolution in the whole state of our mind, showed her in the clear morning light the absolute unfeasibility of the mad idea. She put the thing sternly from her, and turned all her energies to the framing of explanations to satisfy John.

She was not happy. She grudged the passing of the hours. While they lingered she felt that she still held in her hand a precious talisman that might transmute her leaden life to gold. Though she was determined not to use it, it was something to feel that she could. When to-day had slipped irrevocably away she would have said good-bye to all the promise and poetry of life. Nothing would lie before her but dull prose and grey, unhappy years.

She shrank more than ever into herself when John's loud tones announced his return. There had been some error about his arrival; she and Emmeline had already finished dinner, and for the first five minutes storm filled the air.

"Anything from Thornton?" was one of his earliest inquiries when the tempest had a little subsided.

"Cecilia had a letter asking her to an interview

with them," said Emmeline, who was fussing over her husband's meal. "I haven't heard what happened, but I don't think they were able to come to any arrangement. Won't you have your dinner now, dear, before worrying over business?"

"Cecilia, eh?" repeated John, ignoring his wife's suggestion without comment, as his manner was. "What had young Thornton got to say to you, Cis?"

"Nothing. I did not see him, but Mr. St. George, his half-brother. Of course, he has nothing at all to do with his stepfather's affairs, but he wanted me to use my influence——"

"Influence, confound them! I hope you told them you'd do nothing of the sort, and it was like their dashed impertinence to ask it."

"I said I was afraid it wasn't much use," answered Cecilia, trembling with sick repulsion at her brother's violence, but nerving herself to speech. "But, oh, John! if you would only listen to me——"

"There, that will do!" said her brother roughly. "It's no use fighting out the whole business again. I've told you what I mean to do, and I've told them, and what I've said I'll stick to."

"But how can you?"

"Look here, Cecilia," said John, putting down his spoon in disregard of his wife's plaintive entreaty that he would at least finish his soup while it was hot, "there's a whole lot in this business that you know nothing about—" he paused; coarse-fibred as he was he had the decent middle-class reticence—there were stories he would not discuss with his young, unmarried sister—"and I'm not going to tell you," he ended bluntly. "There are things it wouldn't be pleasant for Frank Thornton's wife to hear. Without

any wish of my own I've got mixed up in this matter; it rests with me whether the story's hushed up or not. I could do it—but at considerable inconvenience to myself; and I leave it to you to say whether the treatment I've had from the Thornton family has been such as to call for special effort on their behalf."

"But you would have done it if they had offered to make it worth your while," said Cecilia, her voice low and trembling from the effort with which she spoke.

He pushed back his chair—he was not so thick-skinned but he felt the prick of her words. It was this view of his conduct he was trying to hide out of sight behind rolling clouds of wrath and righteous indignation.

"Yes, I would!" he said violently. "If you like to put it like that, and taunt your brother for what he does on your account, you can. I'm not ashamed of it. I only asked them to do what their own sense of justice should have made them offer to do without any word from me. If they'd treated you decently, and been commonly polite to me, I don't say I wouldn't have held my tongue. But now I'm going to speak, and damn the consequences. If Thornton's sons didn't want their mother to know what a precious scamp of a husband their father was they should have done their duty by you. They've any amount of money between them, and they wouldn't part with a penny of it. Well, now they've got to pay with their father's reputation and their mother's peace of mind, and that's all there is about it. Now, don't say another word or you'll make me angry. Ring the bell, Emmeline, and tell them to take this filthy stuff away. It's like frozen ditchwater."

Cecilia slipped out of the room. She saw that further argument was useless. John was determined to do his worst, he was beyond remonstrance. Later he might repent, but it would be too late then to spare Frank Thornton's wife. She remembered the words of her son: "She is very frail—I shouldn't like to say the shock wouldn't kill her." If he felt that, and was ready to make any sacrifice to save her—if he was a man with so little wish for marriage that the sacrifice was nothing to him—would it not have been best to accept his quixotic offer and bind her brother to silence?

It was too late to consider the matter now. The hall-clock stood at eight—the post-office closed at that hour. She could not telegraph an acceptance. She had had her chance and had given it up—and already she began to feel regret.

The housemaid came out of the dining-room bearing the rejected soup and found her still contemplating the clock.

"If you please, miss," she volunteered in passing, "the master says it is ten minutes fast."

A sudden impulse seized Cecilia, and for the first time in her life she acted without a second thought. It was not John alone who could, on occasion, damn the consequences.

"Has Trimmer gone home yet, Bertha?" she asked breathlessly.

"No, miss, but he is just going."

"Tell him to wait one moment."

There were a couple of loose telegraph forms in the hall-table drawer. She went into the kitchen and filled one in on the corner of the dresser with the pencil of the baker's book. She borrowed a half-

crown from the cook, and thrust coin and form into the boy's hand.

"Run with this to the post-office, Trimmer. If you hand it in before the office is closed you can keep the change." She wanted to ask him to come back and tell her if he was in time, but lacked courage.

Outside in the passage the boy counted the words of the telegram to see what his haul from this transaction would be, and crushed on his cap with glee at finding it was only a "sixpenny."

Certainly it could be no more, for beyond the address, forgetting or reluctant to put her name, Cecilia had written but the one word: "Yes."

CHAPTER VII

HUSBAND AND WIFE

THE point most strongly impressed upon Cecilia in connection with her marriage was the old story of the importance of the first step. It seemed to her—as it has seemed to many of us—that with the first small act of volition individual freedom of action ceases. We are caught up in the machinery of circumstance, of law, and of custom, and our lives are shaped for us on settled lines, regardless of our efforts or resistance.

From the moment when her telegram was despatched to Harry St. George to the moment when she stood with him in the registrar's office and uttered the brief, formal words that made her his wife there had been no point where it seemed possible for her to put down her foot and say she would go no farther. St. George had acted with promptitude; he had allowed no room for repentance, or at least no time for withdrawal. John had been summoned from town the day after his return and was safe in the Midlands while all arrangements for the marriage were made. Emmeline, whose amazement over the monstrous and incredible business it is beyond the power of language to describe, had imbibed too much of her husband's nature not to feel a vague suspicion that in some way Cecilia was being "done." Yet a wedding, even one

shorn of all the shining circumstance that made it worth calling a wedding, was not without interest to her feminine mind. She agreed at once to accompany the bride to the registry office.

No amount of argument would persuade her, however, to look upon the ceremony as the cold, business formality Cecilia endeavoured to convince her it would be.

"It is such a pity to have it on a Friday," she sighed; "everybody knows that Friday is an unlucky day to be married on. And I do think, Cecilia, you need not have worn black for the occasion. Of course, after to-day it will be the proper thing for you, as Frank Thornton's daughter-in-law. I suppose your husband would expect it."

"I am sure my husband will not know or care whether I wear black or scarlet to be married in," said Cecilia, with studied calm. "Don't you understand, Emmeline, that this wedding to-day is the emptiest of empty forms? It is absurd to talk as if there could be any luck or ill-luck about it."

"But it is probably the only wedding you will ever have," persisted Emmeline. "I do think it is a pity for you to wear black. It isn't even as if it were becoming. That hat is quite shabby now, and it never suited you."

"Perhaps not," said the bride, pinning it on with firmness, "but it suits the occasion; it is the plainest I have. The one unpardonable offence against good taste at this affair would be any attempt at dressing up."

"But I really don't see why you should make yourself look *worse* than usual," objected her sister-in-law. "You couldn't be at your best to-day because you

have such a cold. Your eyes are heavy and your voice quite hoarse. But I think for Mr. St. George's sake, and any friends he may have with him, you should try to make yourself appear as well as possible. I am sure no man would want the woman he marries to look as wretched as you do, even if he is going to part from her at the church door."

Cecilia attempted no further argument, and even Emmeline, when the brief ceremony had begun and ended, almost before she had time to realize what was taking place, was obliged to admit to herself that for such a mockery of a wedding it couldn't possibly matter much what you wore.

St. George was not even attended by any personal friend who could be shocked at his bride's lack of adornment.

"I had hoped to have Mallory here to give me away," he said to Cecilia, with a flash of humour for the first and only time breaking through his studiedly matter-of-fact and businesslike demeanour; "but I suppose his disgust at the whole affair is too great for him to turn up. He doesn't approve of our—er—arrangement."

"Doesn't he?" said Cecilia, looking troubled.

"Oh, don't let it bother you," he rejoined easily. "His consent isn't necessary. He will manage all the legal business for us afterwards, when the thing is done."

About ten minutes later the thing was done. Cecilia found a heavy gold ring on her finger and signed her maiden name for the last time, and St. George escorted her and her sister-in-law downstairs to their cab. "You see," he said, "it wasn't a terrible ordeal, and it's going to save a tremendous lot of unpleasantness all round."

"Yes," assented Cecilia, with her eyes fixed on the bobbing flowers of Emmeline's hat just in front of her. She wanted to say something that would convince this man that she had already forgotten that he was legally her husband, and no remark that presented itself to her mind seemed quite sufficiently impersonal.

"By the way," he asked, "would you like any notice sent to the papers?"

"Oh, no!" cried Cecilia, aghast. "Unless"—she caught herself up—"you wish it."

"Not at all," he replied indifferently. "I've so few friends to whom my matrimonial arrangements would make any difference. I didn't know how it might be with you. I shouldn't like you to suffer any avoidable awkwardness——"

"That is not likely," said Cecilia. "I also have few friends to whom my matrimonial arrangements can make any difference."

Something in the confession, though there was not the faintest note of intentional pathos in her tone, seemed to touch the man. He turned and looked at her with kindness.

"Have you any idea where you are going to live, or what you mean to do? It wasn't in the bond for me to ask," he added quickly, as she hesitated, "so you needn't answer if you would rather not. Only you spoke of travelling, and I thought perhaps I might be able to give you some advice." "Interfering ass!" was his own comment on the suggestion the moment he had made it. He was not aware that his regret for the impulse showed in his face, and was not a little relieved that the girl made no response to the friendly overture.

"Thank you very much," she returned, with some coolness. "I had thought of travelling, but I am not sure that I really care about it. I am rather considering taking up the Suffrage."

She spoke on a sudden perverse impulse. She knew instinctively how a man of his stamp would regard that question and the methods of its advocates.

"Ah!" there was a perceptible check in his sympathy, which should have satisfied Cecilia, being just the effect she had intended to produce. "Well, I dare say you will find that even more exciting."

"Of course I shall keep out of the papers," she added.

"Oh, don't let any regard for me keep you out of them, if you particularly wish to get in," he responded, with a little twist of his lips as he helped her into the cab. He held her hand with a friendly grasp as he wished her good-bye. He found not a shadow of attraction in the girl, but he had befriended her, and the fact engendered kindly feeling. There was an idea in his mind that his most prudent course was to keep the whole affair upon strictly business lines; but prudence had never been a salient feature of his character, and it always came more natural to say the pleasant thing. Before all things St. George was an Irishman.

"We say good-bye as friends," he declared. "You mustn't think of me as an enemy. If ever at any time you feel that I could help you, I shall be glad to serve you in any way that is possible. You must remember I am"—he gave a little smile—"a kind of connection."

Fortunately, the cab moved off before he could commit himself further. As it was, Mr. Mallory

arrived on the scene in time to hear these final protestations, and if anything could have deepened his disgust at what he called "the whole insane proceeding" it was these further insanities.

"Is that your strictly formal business arrangement?" he inquired, with dry irony.

"Why, hang it all, Mallory," protested the culprit, "I'd offer as much as that to any woman. Why not to my own wife?"

"You have actually made that young woman your wife?"

"Legally, yes. I am now Benedick, the married man."

"You are mad—quite mad! Your wife! A woman you know next to nothing of!"

"Men marry women they know next to nothing of every day, my dear Mallory. The only difference between their case and mine is that they have to remedy their ignorance by more or less painful experience. I haven't."

"It isn't a matter for jesting, Harry. It's the most serious step you ever took in your life. You don't know yet what it's going to mean to you."

"Oh, come, Mallory, if I've got to repeat all the arguments I've been using to justify the wisdom of my marriage, it will be like going through my wooing all over again. Miss Ward advanced every possible objection you can mention, and if my reasoning was good enough to satisfy her, surely you might let it satisfy you!"

"She did object, eh?"

"So strongly that I shall think better of myself all my life, as a true Irishman, that the lady is now my wife."

"Well, you have at least got a wife who is a more rational being than yourself."

"According to you, and the rest of my family, I could scarcely have failed to do that, as long as I chose my wife outside a lunatic asylum."

"No, I don't suppose you could," agreed his companion thoughtfully. They walked on together for some minutes in silence. "I've always expected you to be made a fool of by a woman some time or other," said the older man at length.

"Faith, I've always had rather a fear of it myself," St. George admitted. "That's why I am inclined to think this marriage with Miss Ward a protective measure specially designed for me by Providence. However much a woman may make a fool of me in future, she can't marry me. Think what I may be spared. I've got a wife who will never ruin me or disgrace my name, or make unreasonable demands upon me. I declare I couldn't have done better for myself if I had tried."

The other looked at him for a moment in almost comic despair.

"I have nothing against Miss Ward—I suppose we ought to say Mrs. St. George."

"I suppose so; it sounds rather odd."

"But your marrying her was the most extraordinary piece of folly even you could be capable of. Your relations ought to have you put under restraint. If I had had the least idea what was in your mind, I should never have countenanced it to the extent of allowing you to meet the lady at my office."

"I told you—afterwards."

"I never for a moment thought you meant it. Your note this morning was a thunderbolt to me. The

whole thing was completely unnecessary. If you had left that man Ward to me—I understood that your only object in meeting his sister was to use your beguiling Irish tongue to get her to influence her brother."

"Yes, my idea was something like that. But I soon found out she'd no influence to use, and this other step occurred to me as the best way of settling all difficulties. I wasn't going to risk my mother's peace of mind by letting that blatant bounder do his worst. I dare say there might have been other ways and better ones of silencing him, but I couldn't see any. And you know I rather believe in acting on impulse, without too much weighing and considering of consequences. One's first instinct more often leads one right than one's judgment."

"I suppose you think that a plausible theory to justify the incredible piece of quixotry you've been guilty of, but if you act on it always you'll get into trouble. As it is—you might have consulted me seriously, Harry, before you committed yourself. You don't seem to realize what you've done. You have given your name and all legal rights and claims to a woman with certain conditions understood, and not a word in writing to show what those conditions are. You are the most foolhardy man I ever knew. What security have you that this girl won't at some future time make the most extravagant demands upon you?"

"Instinct, my dear Mallory, instinct! I'm a bold man on instinct, as Falstaff was a coward. You will admit, I suppose, that I have seen something of the world, enough of men—and women, too—to guess pretty well what they will or won't do under given

circumstances. I can read the character of the woman I have married like a book. I had heard something of her. I know the sort of life she has led and the sort of girl she is. She would go to the world's end rather than thrust herself upon me. She won't like taking the money I'm going to settle on her, but she'll take it because she'll be able to persuade herself that she's only getting her own back; but she will never ask for a penny more—I'll stake my reputation as a judge of men upon it."

"That's very possible. But remember she has a brother, who possesses great influence over her. The whole difficulty might never have arisen if she had been able to keep him in order. You don't know what he may try to do."

"Oh, I'll manage the brother all right now," said St. George easily.

"You haven't heard any more of him?"

"No, so far as he is concerned this has been a clandestine match. But it wasn't necessary to consult him in the matter; my wife is of age."

"But she ought to have some one to safeguard her interests. Has she nothing in writing?"

"Not a line. She never thought of it, neither, as a matter of fact, did I. But it wasn't necessary. We trust one another implicitly. Romeo and Juliet couldn't be more rashly confiding. We'll go along now, though, and settle things, if you like." He stopped a cab and hurried his companion into it. "You see," he began, as they drove off, "I want to allow her five hundred a year."

"You can't afford that at your present rate of living."

"Then I shall have to arrange my rate of living

differently, for I've got to afford it." He proceeded to elaborate the position, but his companion gave him only a divided attention. "I don't like it, Harry," he said, after a while, shaking his head; "this sacrifice was quite uncalled for."

"Oh, pshaw! What is five hundred a year? If I don't spend it in this way, I shall in another."

"I'm not speaking of the money. The sacrifice is your own future. I don't like to think of you married to a woman whose greatest recommendation is that she will never want to have anything to do with you. I should have liked you to make a real marriage with a woman who would be a real companion and a real influence in your life. I'm fond enough of you, my boy, to wish you to have your chance at what I've had the good fortune to find a man's best happiness."

"That's very kind of you," said St. George, not untouched; "but, believe me, you are wasting pity. I don't want that sort of wife. I don't want a companion or an influence. There isn't a woman living I would give up the freedom of my life for—there isn't one, not the best, that I shouldn't find a burden and a bother. The better the woman was the more she would claim and the more her claims would irk me. In all seriousness, Mallory, I believe this shadow of a marriage may be the best thing for me in saving me from the terrible blunder of making a real one."

The older man looked profoundly unconvinced.

"It doesn't follow because you haven't met the woman who wouldn't bore you as a life-companion that you never will. You are still a young man."

"Nearly thirty-five. I should think I was getting out of the danger zone."

"You are just getting into it. And if you meet her now——"

"Oh, look here," said Harry, getting restive, "you might preach like that to every man who binds himself to a wife. They all run the risk of meeting some one in the course of years they like better, and they know they run it. But what then? If everybody stopped to consider risks, there'd be an end of all marrying and giving in marriage, and then you lawyers would be one of the first to shut up shop."

"That's true enough. But the man who takes the risk and marries for love, even if he makes a mistake, gets something from his marriage; you get nothing at all from yours."

"Well, blessed is he that expecteth nothing! You can't persuade me that in ten years' time—if I'm still in the flesh—I shan't be happier in my marriage than ninety-nine out of a hundred bridegrooms who've been married to-day. And now don't you think we might let the matter rest? The thing's a legal fact, and no amount of talking will mend it."

"More's the pity," said the lawyer bluntly. He glanced keenly at his companion. "You protest too much, Harry. I give you credit for more common-sense than you choose to credit yourself with. I believe you'd give ten years of your life at this moment to have the whole thing undone."

"Oh, not quite ten!" rejoined St. George, with a laugh of some embarrassment. He was silent for some moments, with a little frown between his brows; then he broke out impetuously:

"Well, what was I to do? I had made a deliberate proposal."

"Deliberate?"

"Well, I was apparently in my right mind when I made it. I couldn't tell the girl afterwards I had repented of my offer. You know very well that would be an impossibility. Perhaps I wish now I hadn't used my beguiling Irish tongue, as you call it, though, as a matter of fact, it was cold English logic, to the extent I did; but, you see, Miss Ward refused my offer, and when a woman refuses you, though you may know in your heart you ought to go down on your knees in gratitude to her, it's a mere natural instinct to try a little persuasion. But there! it's done now, and I don't suppose it will make much difference in the long run. I thought I should die a bachelor, but fate apparently willed otherwise. I only hope the lady I have made my wife will never regret it more than I do."

If he had known it the wish was already vain. To the lady in question the action to which she stood committed had even now begun to wear the discomposing features of the irretrievable. She sat, the wife of an hour, in a third-class railway carriage—to Emmeline's pain and bewilderment, for if you don't travel first on your wedding-day, even under the remarkable condition of travelling alone, when can you expect to do so?—and tried to feel as she had felt for a brief space on the day when St. George first made his proposal.

But in vain. The deed committed can never wear the same aspect as the deed in contemplation. A creeping shadow of dejection, of shame and fear, of weariness and disgust, darkened the whole of life to her outlook. She tried to thrust it away and to turn her thoughts resolutely to the humour of the situation. It was certainly amusing to consider her appearance

and Emmeline's, so commonplace and uninteresting, so unsuggestive of romance, and, looking at the impassive faces of their fellow-passengers, to imagine the sensation in the compartment if she had suddenly announced herself as a bride. But the humour had no genial glow. Nor had Emmeline's bearing, with its uncertain blending of compassion and respect—a bearing less suited to a bride on her wedding-day than to the chief mourner at a funeral—any power to divert her. The day was ugly, the outlook from the windows sordid, her cold was heavy on her. Her head ached and her throat was sore; physically and mentally she felt wretched.

It was quite early in the day when they reached home, and there seemed nothing to do to fill up the time. She thought the leaden-footed hours would never crawl away. Gladly would she have occupied herself with the most strenuous and prosaic of household duties—anything that would serve, like the old black hat and the third-class carriage, to mark her acceptance of the fact of the day's complete unlikeness to all ordinary wedding-days—but she felt physically unfit. There was nothing for her to do but sit by the fire with Emmeline.

The mood of the latter was sentimentally reminiscent, and her manner was not free from a gentle superiority. Her marriage might not be the ideal union of a maiden's dream—she knew very well what Cecilia thought of it—but it had at least been inaugurated with the conventional accompaniments, white satin and orange-blossom and Mendelssohn's wedding march. Sore and sensitive, loathing the sound of any word remotely suggestive of a bridal, Cecilia was forced to listen to her recollections and

allusions. She fled at the earliest opportunity to her own room, and in utter weariness and dejection of spirit had, it seemed, the good fortune to fall asleep almost at once.

But she was not to escape too easily. She woke in the night, at that hour when the mind, detached by sleep from the clamour and confusions of the day, works with pitiless insight—she woke as a soul might wake on the other side of death, to see the deeds done in the flesh with the pure, purged vision of the spirit—and she could no longer hide from herself the reproach she had put into her life.

She had done more than sell her own birthright. She had taken a man's birthright from him and given him nothing in exchange. It was no excuse that he had urged the sacrifice upon her. She was a woman and should have known better than to take it. It was for her to uphold the sacredness of marriage—to consider what life might have held for both of them, and never could hold now.

"I have done a dreadful thing," whispered Cecilia, staring with scared eyes into the darkness, "and I am ashamed. And I shall be ashamed all my life!"

CHAPTER VIII

RELATIONS-IN-LAW

THIS mood of relentless self-condemnation and abasement did not last. Few of us can manage to remain permanently abased in spirit, even with more heinous crimes on our conscience than this of Cecilia's. Self-respect lifted its tumbled head from the dust and whispered words of excuse and justification. Her wrong had been a real one, and the sacrifice she had accepted was not one of her asking. She had done, and was likely to do, no actual harm to Harry St. George. It would not hurt him for her to bear his name; and his liberty—that was the liberty to fetter himself more effectually at some future date —was possibly a thing he was better without.

But she was not happy in the days that immediately followed her marriage. She was restless, excited, vaguely expectant, inwardly disappointed. The freedom for which she had pined was hers at last, and she did not know how to turn it to account. The world was all before her where to choose, and she shrank back frightened at its vastness. She meant to travel —she had never intended anything else; the alternative she had suggested to St. George on her wedding-day was the fabrication of a perverse moment, of an impulse of pride that prompted her to reject any show

of interest on the part of the man from whom she was determined to accept nothing that was not in the bond. She wanted to go abroad. The white sail sparkling on a blue sea still danced tantalizingly before her eyes, but in the face of the actual preliminaries of travel she was hopelessly at a loss, and neither John nor Emmeline would give her any assistance.

Poor Emmeline was indeed a bewildered and embarrassed woman in these days. The presence of a bride in the house and the absence of all the signs and accessories of a wedding scandalized her to a paralyzing extent. No trousseau, no presents, no wedding-cake, no cards—the lack of these things shocked and distressed her even more than the absence of a bridegroom. She felt herself powerless to grapple with the situation. A normal bride she would have delighted to steer through the necessary formalities of the occasion with the aid of her favourite etiquette book; but no *Manners and Rules of Good Society* gave her any guidance how to proceed under the shockingly abnormal circumstances of Cecilia's case. All the etiquette books treated the presence of the bridegroom as essential, though they none of them made very much of him. This one thing lacking left her rudderless on a sea of doubt and uncertainty. As it was impossible to do things decently and in order she decided to do nothing at all in the matter. She feebly washed her hands of the whole business and devoted all her time and energy to the consideration of what she should say to Mrs. Orville-Grant to make this wild and improper marriage seem an ordinary, conventional affair.

John also disapproved, but from another standpoint. His first sensation at hearing of the arrangement that made further exertion on Cecilia's behalf

unnecessary was that of a man who, leaning heavily and doggedly on some point of resistance, finds it suddenly drawn away from beneath him and staggers to retain his balance. He was for the moment nonplussed, and had remarkably little to say. He was not inclined to give his sister the satisfaction of thinking that she had managed her own affairs better than he could have done for her.

But he had also enough brotherly feeling to be made uncomfortable by the idea that it was his unreasoning violence which had driven his sister into a marriage that might make the tragedy of her life. His was not one of the souls that are full of eyes; his moral vision was conveniently limited. He was not often troubled with the suspicion that his conduct had not been altogether blameless or his motives entirely pure. But sober reflection had scarcely left him proud of the attitude he had taken up in his dealings with Francis Thornton's family. He wished for no further discussion of the subject, and Cecilia was left undisturbed to the freedom of action she found so strangely disconcerting.

It was imperative for her to do something. She had not shamed her soul by a marriage with St. George to go on living in a red brick suburb with John and Emmeline. Neither of them wanted her. She reminded John of things he preferred to forget. Emmeline would have found a sister-in-law with a nice little legacy a welcome companion; but a wife who was no wife, however comfortably independent, was a burden and embarrassment to her. Her manner showed a growing disturbance at the continuance of the situation. It suggested, Cecilia told herself with grim humour, not so much that a wedding had

taken place and the bride been left behind, as that there had been a funeral in the house, and by some unfortunate oversight it had been omitted to remove the corpse.

An intimation had been received by Mrs. St. George that a hundred and twenty-five pounds had been placed to her account at her brother's bank. There was nothing to hinder a flitting. But the question in which direction she should flit still remained unsolved.

She had fallen asleep over her perplexities and a Baedeker sitting by the morning-room fire, one dreary afternoon about a week after her marriage, when the maid came to tell her that a lady wished to see her in the drawing-room. Emmeline was out, and Cecilia disinclined to receive callers.

"Didn't you say that Mrs. Ward was not at home?"

"But the lady asked particularly to see you, miss." The maid gave a little embarrassed cough as she uttered the old form of address. Even the servants found Cecilia's marriage a stumbling-block. Cecilia herself, however, noticed nothing. She sat up among the cushions and rubbed her eyes.

"What name did you say, Bertha?"

"Mrs. Francis Thornton, 'm."

When the door closed on the maid she got up slowly and walked to the mirror above the fire, not from any impulse of vanity, but because it was her habit, in moments of doubt and difficulty, to consult her own reflection in the glass, for she had always been to herself her one and only confidante and adviser. This was an occasion that called for guidance. Though Mrs. Thornton had been indirectly such a potent factor in her destiny, she had never expected to be asked to face in person the bearer of that name. She

could not imagine what St. George's mother could want with her. Had she come to utter reproaches, to give, or to demand, information concerning her son? A dozen wild conjectures flitted through her brain, but she put them sternly aside. It was idle to speculate. The one thing necessary was to collect her faculties—to be cool and self-possessed, so that, whatever the nature of the interview, she might not betray the true reason of her marriage. For the sake of the man who had generously befriended her she must screen, at all costs, the memory of the man who had wronged her. But it was likely to be a difficult parley.

"*Point de faiblesse*, Cecilia," she encouraged her troubled reflection in the glass. "Be Celia—be Cecil —be Mrs. St. George! Only be calm!"

Strengthened by her triple personality, she repaired to the drawing-room. The looking-glass, put to its legitimate use at last, had sent her to possible conflict armed with a certain measure of self-satisfaction. She had waked from sleep with her nerves tranquillized by a sense of warmth and well-being; her face had colour, her hair was becomingly ruffled, her morning blouse was old, but it suited her. She looked as nearly pretty as it was ever her fortune to look as she went forward to meet her visitor.

The woman in heavy mourning garments who rose at her greeting did not think her pretty, but she liked the girl no less on that account. She had never particularly admired beauty in any face but the one that confronted her every day in her own mirror. For nearly seventy years she had contemplated that reflection with tireless satisfaction, and her naïve delight in its charm was as fresh to-day as it had been in her

teens. She had never been able to feel that any other woman's looks really mattered.

Certainly Cecilia thought, meeting her all unprepared in Emmeline's drawing-room, she was a picture, not so much of beautiful age as of changeless youth. Her hair was quite white, but soft and abundant, her skin pink and clear, her figure, slender to fragility, was held youthfully erect, her deep-lashed, lavender blue eyes had the soft, helpless appeal of a child's; in every word and gesture breathed the nameless charm of a woman petted and spoiled through the whole of her life. It was not hard for her new daughter-in-law to understand how Mrs. Thornton's husband—ten years younger than herself—had adored even while he deceived her, and her son had bound himself by a loveless marriage to save her from the possibility of distress.

The slight, veiled figure swept forward and held out both hands in greeting.

"My dear," said a soft musical voice, "you mustn't be vexed with me for coming to see you. Harry said you would not wish it, but I couldn't believe that you would really want us to be strangers, and I, for my part, could never be content to know nothing of you—my dear boy's wife!"

She looked up at her boy's wife with an adorably confiding smile, and her eyes shone dewy with tears. They were quite real tears, for she felt very keenly the sweetness and the pathos of what she was saying.

Cecilia coloured with feeling. This unexpected kindness touched her to the heart. But even with her grateful appreciation of it mingled an uncomfortable wonder as to what exactly St. George had told his mother concerning his marriage.

"It was very sweet of you to think of it," she answered, with all the composure she could command, "but I don't believe M—Harry would have wished you to come." It gave her a curious sensation to speak of her husband by his Christian name, but as he had evidently not revealed the nature of the tie between them it was not for her to arouse suspicion by referring to him in any more formal manner.

"No, dear, in fact he begged me not to. He thought it was too soon for me after my dear husband's death." She sank gracefully into the chair Cecilia had brought forward. "I did not argue with him. It never does to argue with men; they don't like it, and it never alters their opinions. But of course I knew very well that I was the best judge of what I was capable of."

"Then Mr. St. George does not know you are here?" said Cecilia.

"My dear, how can he know it? He is on his way to Central Africa. You haven't heard from him since he sailed? Ah, well, it doesn't surprise me. It would in any other man, but not in Harry. He is always shocking for letting people know things. But he told me before he started not to worry if I did not hear from him, so of course I shall not. Poor boy! I hope he will get on all right, but I can't help feeling this expedition of his is such a mistake. There isn't any doubt that the man he is going in search of is dead—Harry doesn't question it himself; he only wants to find out the details of his death, which I consider quite unnecessary, for they can't be pleasant for his relations to hear. It is a most terrible country, my son Bernard says, infested with cannibals and poisonous reptiles and deadly diseases. I told Harry

before he went away that if he fell into the hands of the cannibals I hoped none of his friends would go out and discover the fact, for I would very much rather not be told of such a disagreeable thing. But he only laughed and said there was no fear of it. Harry never believes that dreadful things can happen to him as they do to other people."

"No, he is certainly rather reckless," agreed Cecilia.

She had listened in wonder to his mother's speech, entirely at a loss what to make of the speaker. Was she utterly heartless in spite of the sweet sympathy of her manner? Could she jest on her son's exposure to the risk of a horrible death? To gather time to sort out her puzzles she rang the bell and ordered tea.

"Oh, I can't wait for that, dear child!" said her visitor, rising quickly from her seat. "I have Belinda in the carriage outside, and the poor little creature will be tired of waiting. I said I shouldn't be a minute. What I really came for was to ask if you couldn't manage to stay with me for a week or two—until I go abroad. You will find it a sad, quiet household," again a soft mist of tears clouded her eyes, "but you will understand and make allowances, I am sure."

"Oh, but I am afraid that is quite impossible!" cried Cecilia. "Your son hasn't perhaps told you that I—that we——"

"No, Harry didn't tell me what your arrangements were. It was only the day before he left England that he informed me that he was married. Of course, if it had been any one else, I should have been astonished and rather hurt, but one knows what to expect with Harry—I mean, one knows that he is always going to do something one doesn't expect. I must

say that I thought at first he was joking, Harry is so fond of saying things with a perfectly serious face that he doesn't really mean—his father had the same habit and I always found it very trying. It is so confusing not to know if people are in earnest. That is why I always feel so much more comfortable with Bernard—my other son—I don't think you have met him. He doesn't say one thing and mean another, and he never jokes about serious things. He was much graver about the marriage than Harry was. I don't think he at all liked the tone his brother took."

"Perhaps he didn't like the wife his brother had taken?" suggested Cecilia, with an inward stab of mortified recollection.

"Perhaps not," assented his mother easily. "But of course we are all going to be fond of Harry's wife now." Again the delightful smile flashed over her charming face, and Cecilia felt her growing doubts and prejudices chased away like clouds before the rising sun. "You must really give me a week or two to get to know you before I leave England. I have not been very well since—since my dear Francis was taken from me"—her voice trembled on a liquid note—"and the doctors have recommended the South of France, but I shall be in England till the end of the month. You will write and let me know what day you will come, and the time I may expect you."

"But, indeed, it is impossible for me to come!" protested Cecilia earnestly. "I—I am leaving England myself."

"But not immediately. You can wait a week at least. My dear, I shall begin to think that Harry has prejudiced you against us, or that you have quarrelled with him, or that something has come between you.

I shall imagine all sorts of dreadful things if you persist in refusing us. You wouldn't want to disappoint a poor lonely woman, whose house has been left very desolate"— She smiled piteously through her glancing tears. "I never had any girl of my own," she went on softly. "My son's wives are all the daughters I shall ever have. You must try and feel to me as if I were your own real mother."

She took the girl's hands, smiling gently up at her with confiding affection. The look in itself was a caress, but she plainly expected to be kissed, and Cecilia, carried away by her wistful appeal, bent and embraced her tenderly.

"Dear—child!" murmured her mother-in-law.

She had suddenly realized in the middle of her sentence that she did not remember her new daughter's name. However, the eloquent pause was perhaps even more effective. She smiled again with an accession of affectionate warmth, pressed the girl's hands lovingly, and went away.

She left a perplexed and bewildered daughter-in-law behind her. The interview had proved so different from anything she had expected that it was long before Cecilia could bring her ideas to order, or decide what to make of her visitor. Perhaps an occasional speculation crossed her mind as to what might be her visitor's idea of her, but she dismissed it as unprofitable, little suspecting how rightly she judged.

Mrs. Thornton, as a matter of fact, had no idea at all. The impression she formed of strangers was rarely a clear one, her mind being too entirely occupied with the impression she herself was making upon them. When assured that this was satisfactory she was charmed with her company without discrimination.

Thus, though she carried away but a confused conception of her son's wife, she left the house quite affectionately disposed towards her. She had not misread the admiration in the girl's eyes, the instinctive response to her soft words. She always liked people who liked her. The only fellow-creatures of whom she ever spoke unkindly were the few solitary individuals who showed themselves able to resist her spell.

She was a sweet and charming woman, as simple as she was insincere, who said pretty things to please and was touched with their prettiness as she said them, and did kind ones with a childish delight in feeling how very kind they were. She had never probably done any act for another in her life with any other motive but kindly vanity or gentle obstinacy, and certainly of herself would never have thought of visiting her son's wife. But the idea had been suggested to her, and Harry's objection and Bernard's more strenuous opposition had solidified the vague intent to decided action. She thought it very sweet to be as unlike the conventional mother-in-law as possible, and felt keenly as she acted her part all the pleasure a charming person can derive from playing a charming rôle. It would be unjust to imply that no genuine emotion mixed with her posing. Her grief for her husband was quite sincere. Though she could not help being overcome by the pathos of her widowed condition whenever she spoke of it, there was no pretence in her feeling. She had considerable affection, too, for her second son and a certain amount of motherly regard for her first-born, but not enough to rouse her to any curiosity concerning the facts of his marriage.

Nothing Cecilia had ever done in her life, always excepting her amazing marriage to Harry St. George, caused her more retrospective astonishment than her consent to pay a visit of some weeks to Harry St. George's mother. Up to that time her one idea had been to put, as soon as possible, the whole width of the world between them, to blot herself from his existence, and as far as might be from his recollection, to have nothing to do with him or any one belonging to him.

Now she was deliberately going to enter his home, to establish relations with his family, to act as if she were really his wife. She could not feel that she was doing right, but was unable to see how she could do differently. Whatever explanation St. George had given of his marriage, he had not managed to convey to his mother's mind any suspicion of the truth. Afterwards, from a closer acquaintance with Mrs. Thornton's mind, Cecilia learned how easily this might be, and exonerated Mrs. Thornton's son from the charge of being insufficiently explicit. It seemed to her that to refuse the invitation offered might be to implant a suspicion which would lead to a revelation of all that had been concealed with such pains and sacrifices. She was doing the only thing that could be done. But beneath all her arguments she felt a deep inward conviction that St. George would not approve of the step she was taking, and the thought of his possible astonishment and vexation if he heard of it added to the perturbation with which she made her preparations for the visit.

Emmeline, however, was in a state of high delight. She felt her sister's marriage lifted to a different plane by this recognition from her husband's family. It

became a thing she could discuss with Mrs. Orville-Grant.

"I shall certainly let her know that you are married now, Cecilia," she declared, in an overflow of triumph. "And I shall tell her that you will perhaps be able to see to the bazaar shopping she was speaking of while you are staying with Mr. St. George's people in the West End."

"Would you call Kensington the West End?" asked Cecilia dubiously, too much jarred by her sister-in-law's speech not to take exception to something in it.

"The postmark is W.," returned Mrs. Ward triumphantly.

Postmarks were no trifling matter to her suburban mind. For herself, she would never have hesitated between a cramped villa in a back street from which her letters could be addressed S.W. and a more commodious residence in a district postally described as S.E.

The cab that carried Cecilia through the region whose postmark is W. a few days later carried a fare with an absurdly agitated heart. Since that long-ago visit to Cousin Ursula, of which this present one was the remote consequence, she had never, despite her twenty-five years, been away from home alone before. She was going, in what she thought to be a false character, to the home of a man who was not really her husband, to meet his brother, who would be hostile, and his friends, who would be critical. Was it possible that she would come through the ordeal with any comfort or credit? His mother, it was true, had been gracious and kind; but would she continue to be gracious when she came to realize more clearly what sort of a girl it was that her son had married?

And if by any chance she found out for what reason he had married her! Cecilia's spirit quailed before a prospect so appalling.

The cab set her down in front of a tall, brown house of dingy aspect, and she gathered all her forces for the encounter before her. Her teeth were set as she walked up the steps and rang the bell, but she performed that daring act with outward ease and assurance. She was making a new beginning. Whatever lay before her, she was free at least from the cramping fetters of habit and association; she was to play her part, she thought, for the moment forgetting Bernard, on a fresh stage, before spectators who did not know her as a failure. This was the chance of her life. Now or never was her opportunity to prove the stuff that was in her.

Her manner gained a sort of spurious confidence as she gave her name to the servant who opened the door. Mrs. St. George had a clear record. She would have been conscious herself, and the man might subtly have recognized her consciousness, of the dismal reputation of the dull Miss Ward.

The man said Mrs. Thornton was not at home, but would be in shortly, and showed her up to the drawing-room.

At first sight the pleasant, soft-hued, fire-bright room seemed to be empty, but as the door closed behind the man a little, lithe figure uncurled itself from the depths of a big chintz-covered chair and came forward with a smile to meet her.

"Of course you don't know who I am," was her greeting, "and there's nobody here to tell you, so I shall just have to introduce myself. I'm Biddy."

She was a pretty little creature, with a fresh, round,

smiling face, wavy bronze-brown hair, and arch grey eyes. She wore a frock of soft, pale heliotrope, and a great many chains and bangles and gleaming rings. The apparition was so charming and so unexpected, and the frank friendliness of her greeting so reassuring, that Cecilia found herself responding with a perfectly natural and friendly smile:

"And who is Biddy?"

The girl lifted her eyebrows with a comical little frown and spread out both hands.

"You haven't heard of me? Not Biddy Jerome? Oh, really, this is too absurd! We are going to be sisters-in-law, and you don't even know my name."

"Sisters-in-law!" echoed Cecilia. A vision of Emmeline's drab, spare little person flitted before her mind, oddly contrasting with the bright young creature that spoke.

"Oh, well," said the latter, "kind of. I'm engaged to Bernard, don't you know. Bernard Thornton, Harry's brother."

"Oh, of course. How stupid of me!" murmured Cecilia.

"Come to the fire," said this new specimen of a sister-in-law, "and we'll have some tea. Mutti had to go out on quite unexpected business. She'll be in soon, but she said we were not to wait for her."

She drew forward a chair with an inviting little pat of the cushions and flitted away to a tea-table in the corner of the room.

It was all like a dream to Cecilia—the pleasant room, bright with firelight and spring flowers, the cheerful rattle of teacups, the pretty, friendly little figure—in this house where she had expected only sadness and gloom, and the brooding shadow of bereavement and

shame. She was inclined to feel herself part of the dream. She leaned back in her chair and loosened her furs with a vague, pleasurable sense of being some other tranquil, self-possessed person, and not nervous, awkward Cecilia at all. Her voice, when she spoke, struck agreeably upon her own ear—it was so carelessly easy and smiling. It sounded so natural—and was so unreal.

"Will you think me very ignorant if I ask who Mutti is? Is it some one else I ought to know?"

"Mutti? Oh, you know her, of course, but not by that name. I mean Mrs. Thornton. I call her that—nobody else. It's German for mother—a people's word, but it is a *Kosenname* too. I couldn't give my own darling mother's word to anybody else, but Mutti is a dear coaxy little name for Bernard's. Isn't she sweet? I've known her ever since I was a little girl, and I've always adored her."

In her enthusiasm she spilt the tea she was carrying across the room to her guest, and had to go back and get a clean saucer.

"You are not German, are you?" asked Cecilia, helping herself to sugar.

"*Ei bewahre!* I was in Leipzig for two years after my mother died, studying music, and since I came home I can't quite keep my tongue clear of German expressions. Bernard does hate it so." She looked thoughtfully into the fire. "I was trying to break myself of the habit, but I gave it up when I found that out. It is so good for Bernard to have to put up with things he doesn't like."

Cecilia was a little amused at the stern domestic discipline apparently in store for the lordly Bernard.

"I suppose he didn't like your going to Germany?" she hazarded with a smile.

"No, he didn't; but he couldn't say anything—at least nothing I was bound to pay any attention to. We weren't engaged then. The whole thing's quite recent." She turned from the fire with a funny little shrug, as if her engagement were a youthful folly for which she were not quite answerable. "You see, he has been asking me to marry him for years—I mean he has been asking me for years to marry him for ever—and I always refused. And then he came to me one day, not very long ago, in great distress and told me he wasn't going to ask me again for his father's affairs were all in confusion, and it might be years before he was in a position to marry any one. And I said, 'If that's so, Bernard, you can just tell all your friends that a marriage has been arranged, for that's precisely the sort of engagement I should like to have.' He didn't quite like being accepted on that understanding," she went on meditatively, playing with her teaspoon, "but he saw it was his only chance of getting me, so we were engaged. My guardian didn't altogether approve, but I am twenty-one, so of course I could do as I liked. You wouldn't think I was twenty-one to look at me, would you? *Say* you wouldn't!"

"I shouldn't, indeed," Cecilia assured her earnestly.

Biddy lay back in her chair. "Oh, you are nice! I believe I am going to like you. Sisters-in-law—the kind we are going to be—usually hate one another like cats, but we'll be friends, won't we? Let's begin at once to call one another by our Christian names—I mean our real names, not our baptismal ones. Would you believe it, they christened me

Belinda! I can't for the life of me imagine how anybody could make Biddy out of that, but they managed it somehow—or I did it myself when I was a little thing learning to talk—and I'm very glad it was done. Fancy going through life Belinda!"

"So you are Belinda!" exclaimed Cecilia unwarily. "I thought it was a dog."

"Me?"

"I mean it was you who were in the carriage with Mrs. Thornton the day she called on me?"

"To be sure it was—Mutti always will call me Belinda. It was I who made her come to see you."

"She didn't mean to come herself, then?" said Cecilia quickly.

The girl laughed. "Oh, yes, she did. But Mutti is such a lazy, procrastinating little thing, she always thinks to-morrow will be as good as to-day for doing anything, and the day after still better. She must have caught the way of it from her Irish husband."

Cecilia said nothing, but she could not resist the reflection that Mrs. Thornton's son had certainly not caught this way from his Irish father. Something of the same idea may have occurred to Biddy's mind, for she went on rather quickly:

"But I am always in a hurry, and I did want to see you so much."

"To see me!" repeated Cecilia blankly. It was the first time in her life any one had expressed any eagerness for the sight.

Biddy nodded. "Awfully."

"But why?" questioned the other girl in amazement.

Biddy looked a trifle confused. "Never mind why now; I can't tell you. About your name. Cecilia is dreadfully stiff and formal—at least, it's so saint-like

it quite oppresses me. If it were mine I should never feel that I ought to do anything but sit at an organ with a halo round my head. Are you musical?"

"No; I play very little—and very badly when any one is listening to me."

"But you sing. I am sure you sing?"

"No, I have never learned." She looked up and, catching Biddy's eyes fixed on her with grave consideration, smiled faintly.

"Well," said that young person briskly, "if you are not musical there is no reason why you should be called Cecilia. Has nobody any special intimate name for you? Not Harry?"

Cecilia flushed up with a sudden crimson flame.

"Oh, I do beg your pardon!" cried Biddy, clasping her hands distressfully. "I oughtn't to have said that. I'm so sorry. And I promised so faithfully not to."

"Whom did you promise?"

"Bernard!—but I don't care what he says. I didn't mean to hurt you."

She came and knelt down by Cecilia's side and slipped her pretty little ringed fingers appealingly into the other girl's.

"Say you forgive me!"

"There is nothing to forgive," she said with some constraint.

"Yes there is, but we won't talk about it. Be friends with me, please, Cecilia. Call me Biddy, and I—I'll call you Cecily. You're not quite a Cecil, somehow. Oh, what 's the matter—did I hurt you?"

"No," said the girl gently, pressing her hand, "you didn't hurt me. You are a dear little Biddy, and you can call me what you like."

Some time later, when the first dinner-bell sounded, as Mrs. Thornton had still not returned, Biddy went up with the guest to show her her room, and, so had the acquaintance ripened, lingered to assist at her toilet. Shy and unused to such companionship, Cecilia would rather have been alone, but there was still something in the girlish interest and intimacy that warmed her heart.

A bright fire and softly shaded candles lighted the comfortable old-fashioned room. A grave-faced, elderly maid had unpacked Mrs. St. George's belongings and laid her evening garments ready for her on the bed. Biddy sat on the side of it and chattered while her companion made her simple preparations, till she came to the dressing-table, and, taking up her hair-brush, surveyed herself doubtfully in the glass.

"My hair's really all right, isn't it?" she said, looking round in appeal. "Do you think it is necessary to take it down and do it up again?"

"Not if you are going to do it up again as it is now," responded Biddy gravely.

The other coloured sensitively.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" cried Biddy remorsefully. "What a blundering brute I am to-day! Of course, it's perfectly nice and—and neat. But, Cecily, it doesn't suit you. Don't you see that it doesn't? And it's such a pity because the colour's so very pretty, and you have such a splendid lot of it. I wish you would let Truey do it for you. Do!" with kindling eagerness, "it would be such a treat for her! That was Truey who was here, Mutti's maid, Truman. She's a grumpy old thing, as deaf as a post, but she has a perfect genius for hair-dressing. I always come here and let her do mine for me when I am

going anywhere special; but neither Mutti's hair nor mine is like yours. Oh, Cecily, do let her see what she can do with it. You'd be perfectly astonished at the result!"

"I dare say I should," said Cecilia. She stood before the glass with the brush in her hand, the colour coming and going in her cheek. "Nobody has arranged my hair for me," she said slowly, "since I was a child. Nobody has cared how I did it, or noticed how it looked when it was done. Why do you, Biddy?"

"Because I'm so sorry for you," murmured Biddy, nervously fingering the silver-topped bottles on the table before her. "Because you look just like that—as if nobody had ever cared about you, and you had got so used to it that you had left off caring about yourself. I can't bear to think," a little smile trembled around her lips, "that any girl is so unhappy that she's past troubling whether her hair is done in a way that suits her or not. Now look here!" she came forward suddenly, and putting up her hands with swift audacity, pulled out combs and hairpins till she shook the other girl's bright locks in a thick, soft cloud about her. "There! I knew it was lovely! Yes, I know what you think. I'm an impertinent little brat! Box my ears if you like, or beat me with the hair-brush, but do confess that with hair like that it's a sin and a shame not to make the best you can of it."

She put her arms round Cecilia, and met her eyes, smiling, in the glass. The colour flushed softly into the girl's face and a quick mist of tears blotted out the double reflection. She shook back her hair, and, bending down, kissed impulsively the little bright eager face. And she did not know that in yielding to the

sudden warm impulse she had made an advance in the art of winning affection and exercising charm more effectual than anything that Truman's clever fingers could accomplish in the way of elaborate and artistic coiffure.

CHAPTER IX

THE NEW WORLD

ALONE in confidence with her *fiancé* that evening Biddy announced that she found her future sister-in-law even more interesting than she had expected.

There was a challenge in her words, but Bernard did not take it up. They had already had more than one quarrel on the subject, and he was in a mood for peace. He was as fond of his bright little Biddy as it was his cool, self-centred nature to be of any one, and it really vexed him to see her wasting her precious sweetness on such very desert air as his brother's wife. To him Cecilia was absolutely unattractive and devoid of charm. He was always retentive of first impressions, and no slight improvement in tone or bearing, no influence from the happier surroundings under which he met her for the second time, could drive from his mind the conviction that she was an entirely impossible person. It must also be admitted that in his company Cecilia had lost something of her newly acquired self-possession and ease. He contented himself, however, with one last protest.

"I don't see what you find interesting in her. She's plain, she's dull, she's badly dressed, and she has a wretched manner."

"But a nice voice."

"I never noticed it. To be sure I haven't had much opportunity of judging. The first time I met her she scarcely opened her mouth, and when she did she was gasping with nervousness."

"She didn't gasp this evening."

"But she didn't talk."

"Yes, she did, though not as much as when we were alone together this afternoon. I expect she felt strange and shy among us all. It will be different when she gets more used to us."

"I don't see the necessity for letting her get used to us. I have said all along, Biddy, it was the greatest mistake to ask her here at all. It wasn't in the least what Harry intended. I have told you that their marriage was simply a business arrangement. There was no question of affection on either side. I should think you had only to look at the girl to see that Harry didn't marry her for love. You know, dear, I believe you've got some romantic notion in your head of improving that girl out of all recognition and carrying Harry by storm the next time he sees her—as if they were a couple in a novel. And it's all such a mistake. Transformations like that don't take place in real life, and, anyway, Harry isn't the man to be carried by storm or to marry and settle down, and Cecilia—Cecily—whatever she calls herself—isn't the woman to make him. You'd much better leave them both alone to go their own way. Drop that idea of asking her to go with you and my mother to Aix. She'd be much happier going round the world with a companion of her own sort—a high-school teacher in spectacles, with a waterproof and a Baedeker. That's the style of thing she's suited

for. It never does to take people out of their natural environment."

"Then in that case," said Biddy gravely, "you want to be very sure what a person's natural environment is. I don't feel you are right about Cecily's. I see thwarted possibilities in her. I've always had a weakness for developing possibilities in people and things. I don't know why Harry married her, and I've promised never to ask, so I'll leave him out of the question. But I mean to do what I can for his wife. She looks like a plant that has never been in the sunshine, and I want to get her there and make her bloom. She only needs encouragement. She's like the White Queen, poor dear. 'A little kindness would do wonders with her.'"

"Kindness and putting her hair in papers," suggested Bernard, smiling in spite of himself.

"That's just it!" cried Biddy delightedly. "How nice of you to suggest it, Bernard! I'm going to make her hair curl."

"It's a mistake," he persisted, "and one day you'll admit that I was right. Improve that girl if it amuses you—there's certainly room for improvement—but don't expect to do any good by it or imagine that Harry will ever feel grateful to you. He'll probably never see any difference in her; and as for falling in love with his own wife—such a wife—it is an utterly absurd idea!"

It would perhaps be unkind to inquire how far Bernard allowed his wish to be the father of his thought. He had been very much upset by his brother's marriage and felt himself unfairly treated in the matter. To a certain extent he admitted he had been to blame. He might have exerted himself to

conciliate the man Ward instead of exasperating him, and when his brother was desirous of repairing the wrong done to the sister he might have placed fewer hindrances in his path. Bernard's nature was coldly just. He admitted that if he had done more Harry would have done less; but could he, as a reasonable being, have expected that any but a maniac would do so much!

The news that the marriage had actually taken place was a blow from which he had not yet recovered. He was far from reckoning on his brother's death, but he never shut his eyes to facts. A wandering, adventurous mode of existence made the life of the latter uncertain, and he was his heir. He had never expected Harry to marry, and though he was too fair-minded to dispute his right to do so, he was too selfish not to resent it. In the present case the very slightness of the tie and the insufficiency of any motive for forming it seemed an added grievance. A real union might naturally have been more fatal to his hope of succession, but it would have irritated him less than this mockery of a marriage by which his brother's inexplicable freak of quixotry had placed another life between him and his inheritance.

It was understood that in the event of her husband's death Cecilia would receive from his estate no more than the interest on her ten thousand pounds. But where he had expected the whole, Bernard could not be grateful for a part. He resented her position and claims; he wanted to have nothing to do with her. He did not intend to quarrel any longer with his *fiancée*, whose wilful and ignorant interference had brought the girl under his mother's roof, and he could not treat his mother's guest with discourtesy; but to

accept this interloper as a sister, to aid and abet Biddy in her wild idea of making the relationship between her and his brother a real one, was not to be entertained for a moment.

Nothing was further from his thought than to impose impediments to the marriage of true minds; but to plot and scheme to bring two persons together whose one desire was to be kept apart, when such a step might be fatal not only to their happiness but to his own interests, seemed to Bernard to touch the limit of the ridiculous.

Fortunately for him, self-interest was so far from being a guiding motive in Biddy's conduct that she was incapable of suspecting that it might be a factor in her *fiancé's*—it is safe to say he would not long have remained her *fiancé* if she had suspected it. She looked upon his opposition to her plan as the usual brake of cold, practical common-sense which it is the function of man to apply to the headlong, divinely inspired energies of womankind, and allowed her efforts to be as little hindered by it as possible.

For a wonder, she did not find in the subject of her schemes the obstacle she might have expected if she had known her better. Cecilia saw through them clearly, but she was in a softened, amenable mood and less resolutely bent on standing in her own light than was usually the case. She divined the ultimate intentions of her "sort of sister-in-law," and perceived that the interest she had inspired was falsely founded on a more romantic conception of the circumstances of her marriage than the facts warranted—the tie that bound her to Biddy was as artificial as the tie which bound her to St. George; but the girl's friendship and affection were so grateful to her chilled,

repressed spirit that she could not close her heart against their influence or quarrel with their manifestations.

She submitted her head to Truman's deft fingers and kept her sensitive shrinking to herself when Biddy triumphed openly, and called on Mrs. Thornton to triumph, in the result. She allowed herself to be coaxed to the piano and, encouraged by her enthusiastic auditor as she had never been by John's bored guests, let her voice ring out in its fulness, with a result that astonished herself. She had a whole day's shopping with Biddy—a delightful day of daring wickedness—when she bought all sorts of extravagant and becoming frivolities, and returned home, feeling herself an abandoned worldling, and rather enjoying the sensation. She did not enjoy signing the cheque that paid for this day's pleasure—the first instalment of the wages of sin, as she told herself uncompromisingly. But by this time her mood was reckless. The relative importance of the sheep and the lamb had ceased to seem considerable.

Not even the pangs of a guilty conscience could make those first days of her emancipation other than delightful. It was surprising how much Biddy contrived to cram into them. Matinées, concerts, picture-galleries, shopping, luncheon and tea-parties with her friends—Cecilia's hours were crowded with new impressions.

Bernard's *fiancée* affected a mild Bohemianism which Bernard in no way approved. The delight of shocking him undoubtedly added a zest to her defiance of what she called "Kensingtonian conventions"; but her bright, modern independence was quite natural to her. Most of her friends "did things." They studied art, music, or medicine; they went in for

journalism, indexing, or secretarial work. They lived in tiny, high-up flats, lunched at weird foreign restaurants, made up river and theatre parties on the cheap, and dressed according to the dictates of fancy rather than fashion. They were a bright, good-humoured, happy-go-lucky set. Cecilia found them delightfully unusual and entertaining. She got on with them far better than with Emmeline's friends in the suburbs; their interests and their talk were concerned with real things. At their lively discussions and brisk bandying of argument and retort she sat a listener for the most part, feeling very quiet and sober and slow-witted, but alone with one or two of them conversation sometimes became interesting and intimate; and she never writhed under blighting indifference or chilling insolence, as in her momentous encounter with Miss Orville-Grant.

There was a subtle difference in the manner of these new acquaintances which Cecilia scarcely liked to admit to herself might not lie in the character of the girls or be due to the ægis of Biddy's companionship, but to the fact that she was in their eyes a married woman. Not one of them but would have contested hotly the claims to consideration of the young matron over the single girl, yet at the back of their minds a feeling lurked which made some distinction between Cecilia as the dull, ineffective Miss Ward, and Cecilia as Mrs. St. George. She had "done something." Marriage might be, as they were all inclined to believe, one of the most strenuous and burdensome of professions, but it meant an occupation and a purpose in life. What they would have thought of a girl content to live in browbeaten dependence on a brother Cecilia blushed to think.

Biddy's friends outspokenly scorned husbands. They were young and healthy; they had well-to-do kindred and friends who helped out their deficiencies of income with timely gifts; they had, most of them, comfortable homes in the suburbs or provinces where they could put into port in case of sickness. It dawned upon Cecilia, after a time, that these light-hearted young people were swimming on bladders. The occasional glimpse she got of the real struggle of women to keep their heads above the deep waters of poverty filled her less with envy than dismay, and a dangerous warmth of gratitude towards the man who had rescued her from such dire possibilities. Her nature was almost morbidly responsive to kindness. St. George began to wear for a brief space the knightly colours of his namesake. But the weakness was ruthlessly trampled upon as soon as discovered, and she threw herself vigorously into the gaieties and distractions and energies of her new life.

It was an understood thing now that she was to accompany Mrs. Thornton and Biddy to Aix-les-Bains. At the end of the month the house in Kensington with all its effects was to be sold. Bernard wished his mother to remain abroad for months, partly to be safe from the gossip of old friends and neighbours, and partly because her health gave some cause for anxiety. Her natural indolence was merging into more definitely invalid ways, the gentle vagueness of understanding was growing upon her. In the business of departure Cecilia found herself becoming less a guest and more a daughter in the household. Matters were brought to her for decision, and, always with the feeling of one who played a part, she found herself assuming a certain authority. It

was all strange and unreal—the rôle of a reliable, business woman was at least as alien as any character which she had assumed or had had thrust upon her in the last month, but to her surprise she found herself acting it with some success.

Bernard, like most men, was inclined to think a girl so plain and uninteresting must be practical and capable. He ceased to demur at her position in the family; he even began to feel some satisfaction that the burden of his mother's growing weakness should not rest on the slender shoulders of his gay little betrothed. Cecilia would be a useful companion and aid to the younger girl in view of possible contingencies. It was all a misconception, Cecilia felt. Biddy, for all her sparkling prettiness, was by far the more practical and capable of the two. But protest was vain. It seemed her destiny to have her fortunes moulded by others. It was taken for granted she would go to Aix, and to Aix she went.

It was a different setting forth upon her travels from any she had pictured. There was no wild romance and adventure, nothing but smooth ease and comfort, the quiet efficiency of well-trained servants, the civility and attention of well-tipped railway officials. Bernard and Biddy's guardian, Major Jerome, were in attendance at the station, and lavished chocolates and illustrated papers. It was not adventurous, but it was not uninterestihg, Cecilia thought—outwardly at least. She saw the whole group as she and Emmeline might have seen it, making their way along the crowded platform, with John pushing and storming ahead—Mrs. Thornton, graceful, fragile, in the pathos of her widow's garb, Biddy, piquant and pretty, in a suggestion of half-mourning,

Bernard's handsome presence and studiedly courteous bearing, the fine soldierly figure of Major Jerome, and herself, in the assurance of a well-cut travelling-coat and irreproachable hat, consciously less out of the picture than usual. She knew that both Bernard and the Major saw her only as an appendage to Biddy, as her companion and support; but when had she expected to be first with any living soul?

Life was giving her more than she expected or had deserved. There was hope and happiness in her heart as the train steamed out through the murky London air towards the south and the sun.

PART II

CHAPTER I

TRAVELLERS RETURN

"MIGGS!" called Miss Salome Verrinder, raising a clear, peremptory voice, "aren't you coming to get your mail?"

She sat in the window of a small but charming flat, high up in a large block, overlooking London from the south-west. Before her stretched mile after mile of roof and chimney-pot, but down in the street below green tree-tops rustled pleasantly, and here and there through a vista of houses could be caught the metallic glint of the river. The wide sweep of sky gave a pleasant sense of airiness and space, the spring sunshine gleamed brightly on roof and spire, but the spring air wandering in at the open window was fresh; Miss Verrinder drew the folds of her long travelling-coat closer about her.

She was still cloaked and hatted and veiled as she had arrived from her journey, but there was no sign of the dust and fatigue of travel upon her as she sat in the window-seat tearing open letter after letter of her pile of correspondence with a quick vivacity of movement. The lines of her exceedingly well-cut coat showed a figure slim, tall, and very erect. The

neat cloth hat rested on soft, shining masses of very fair hair. A pair of brilliant hazel eyes with dark lashes and delicately marked, flexible brows was the one really good feature of a face too thin and pale for beauty; but the piquancy of colouring and the shrewd humour and alert intelligence of expression gave it a vivid and arresting charm. Her dress had the individuality and perfection of detail more often found in the American than the English woman, and from this fact and the assurance of her carriage, her ready tongue and unfailing self-possession, an occasional intonation and turn of speech, perhaps even from the circumstance that she was known among her intimates as Sallie, strangers were apt to mistake Miss Verrinder's nationality. But it was a mistake she never suffered to continue longer than was necessary.

"When I particularly wish to secure attention in a crowd, or to have my simplest remarks considered witty and original," she once confided to a friend, "I am willing to have it supposed that I come from the land where most of the Sallies come from; at other times I prefer to be recognized as an Englishwoman."

She put aside a pile of letters and gathered a few together for special consideration before raising her voice again.

"Miggs!" she cried then, with increasing energy, "are you coming?"

"Sorry, Sallie dear," replied a voice from the rear, "I can't just this moment. The fire's out and the kettle won't boil."

"Oh, blow the kettle—I mean the fire! Tell the charlady to turn on the gas or the methylated spirit

and you come and sort your correspondence. There's stacks of it!"

"Circulars!" said the other girl, appearing in the doorway.

"Probably; but there may be a few grains of wheat among the chaff. There's a letter from that sister-in-law of yours anyway."

"What, the little dear Biddy! I 'll just go and wash my hands——"

"Quite unnecessary!" said Miss Verrinder calmly, tossing her the letter. "It's all blots and blackness already from Biddy's disgraceful writing; you can't possibly damage its appearance. I really wonder that child's correct young husband doesn't set her copies."

"It's a very nice little letter," said Cecilia, subsiding into the other window-seat and reading it.

"Any news in it?"

"Yes; the baby's got a tooth."

"And she takes four pages to tell you so! These mothers! Biddy wrote to me the other day to tell me she had read my last story and she dismissed the whole matter in four lines. There's a sense of proportion for you! And here's my sister Elizabeth—really a very sensible girl in many respects, Cecil—breaks off in the middle of a most interesting appreciation of the last immortal work of Sarah Verity to devote two whole sheets to telling me how they have had measles at Chardleigh, and she was afraid the children were going to get them, and they didn't! What do you think of that? Of course, if the children had taken the disease I should have expected to suffer as an aunt, but two sheets of wholly irrelevant measles! It's too much! Do you suppose that you or I could

sink to that level, Miggs? Do you think that I could write four whole pages about one tooth?"

"If it were your own baby—" suggested Cecilia, doubtfully.

"Never! Much more possibility if it were my own tooth."

Cecilia slipped the letter back into its envelope.

"The charlady has laid tea in the dining-room. Come and have some, Salome. And do leave off patting yourself on the back for being so much wiser than other women. You are the most conceited spinster I ever knew!"

She came and stood beside her friend, looking down at her with a smile.

The smile had both humour and sweetness. Two years of a changed and happy environment had made great differences in Cecilia. Something was awake in her face which had slept. It was as if a buried flame had burnt its way through the dull weight of oppression and kindled the colourless mask of her features to warmth and animation. Her eyes still held something of shyness, but it was the gentle, friendly shyness that appeals, not the blank hostility and defiance which repel. Life had unexpectedly turned a sunny side to her, and she had learned to smile responsively into the face of a world which had proved kinder than her thought.

The years had worked marvels with her, but not miracles. She was dressed in much the same fashion as her friend, and held her tall, slim figure in perhaps unconscious imitation of the latter's slender erectness; but the distinction that was Sallie's, that inborn, indefinable gift of fitting oneself to the mode of the moment and lending it grace that there is no word to

describe which is not vulgar or which does not soon become so, was lacking. She could walk through the streets and attract no attention, and enter a room without creating any sensation whatever. She had not Salome's vivid magnetism or the breezy vitality which lent an air of freshness and raciness to the latter's most commonplace utterances. Sallie, indeed, sometimes amused herself by raising a laugh with the repetition of some observation of Cecilia's which had been heard with unsmiling gravity; yet to those who knew her intimately she was not without a quiet distinction—an atmosphere—of her own. She never kindled into brilliance in general conversation, she talked best *tête-à-tête*, and excelled as a listener. With her friend she was both a contrast and a harmony—sometimes shadow to her sunshine, sometimes sunshine to her breeze. The bond between the two was deep and strong, and though Cecilia herself was not quick at forming intimacies, Salome's friends usually liked her and ended by adopting her as their own. In fact, after the imperfect fashion in which ideals realize themselves in actual life, she had become almost the Cecil of her youthful imaginings.

"Was there any news in your home letters, besides the irrelevant measles?" she asked, as she sat at the table pouring out tea.

"Not much. I don't think I shall go down to Devonshire yet—at least not for more than a flying visit. My family doesn't seem wanting me very badly. My aunt Clarissa is too busy with her garden, my married sister Elizabeth too absorbed with her babes, and my pretty sister Joyce too much occupied in refusing offers of marriage. I shall leave them to these low pursuits and give myself up to work."

"Is it a low pursuit, refusing offers of marriage?" inquired Cecilia with some significance.

"Not necessarily, but I think it is a sign that your previous pursuits have been low if you have to refuse too many of them—even when you are as pretty as my sister Joyce. One now and then is an accident that can happen in the life of any woman, but too many are a bad sign—considering that the average Englishman doesn't propose with ease or without encouragement. Of course," she added pensively, "there are exceptions, as I know to my cost. I've had to refuse half a dozen myself in a single month."

"Sallie dear!"

"Oh, my record isn't as devastating as it sounds. They all came from the same person."

"The brother-in-law's brother?"

"Lionel West, to be sure. He never makes any secret of his hopeless attachment, so I don't see why I should."

"Is it so hopeless? Don't you think you will ever marry him, Sallie?"

"In my sober senses, certainly not! But we all have to make allowances for the weak moments of life. It's only in the weak moments marriages ever are made."

"It's a pity Lionel can't hear you making allowance for yours," observed Cecilia, smiling. "He would think that his cause was won."

"Probably, but nothing could be more mistaken. Unfortunately—or rather fortunately for me—my weak moments only occur in his absence. When he is present adamant is soft compared with me. I suppose that is because when he is away I do the love-making myself and think of all the right things

for him to say, and when he is present he doesn't say them, but makes love in his own bungling fashion, which is bad. So few men know how to make love really well, you know, Cecil."

"I don't know. Nobody ever tried to make love to me," said Cecilia laughing. "But I think they seem to do it well enough to suit their purpose. The world would be an even more distracting place to live in than it is if they were any cleverer at it."

"That's because women are so easily pleased. But to a really critical taste their efforts are deplorable. Nobody knows what I have suffered, as an artist, when Lionel has been proposing to me and saying all the things that he oughtn't to say—even while I rejoiced, as a woman, that he didn't happen to be hitting on the right ones. I could sometimes scarcely help giving him a hint, fatal to my own interests as it would have been."

"I am afraid," said Cecilia, shaking her head, "it is because Lionel isn't the right man that he says all the wrong things. If he were that, there would only be one thing for him to say and he would say it easily enough. Have some more tea?" she ended practically.

"Thanks, I'll have another cup. 'Stay me with flagons, etc., for I am sick of love.'" She received her cup, and sat for some minutes stirring it in pensive silence. "You see," she said then, looking up, with her delicate, flexible brows drawn into an expression of whimsical protest, "I 'm really very fond of Lal. We have been chums ever since we were, as you might say, boys together. If only he would choose his moments with more discretion! But when I have one of my own fascinating heroes in the thick of a delightful love scene—really well done, Miggs—I don't

want to be interrupted to listen to a commonplace, everyday proposal that I have heard in substance a dozen times already. Lionel only bothers me then. And if he were my husband he would bother me much more. It sounds inhuman, but my stories are my children. Doesn't every woman who is a mother end by caring more for her children than her husband? And Lionel isn't even the father of mine."

"Isn't he responsible for the existence of some of them? Do you never use him as a model for your heroes?"

"*Never!* Only for the rejected lovers. In fact, to prevent a misconception, it's my one endeavour to keep my heroes as unlike Lionel as possible, and, unfortunately, as he happens to be dark and good-looking, my poor men must all be ugly and have red hair. It's hard on them. It might just as well have been Lionel who had red hair."

"Sallie, you're a wretch!"

"I'm not—I'm a writer. I know Sarah Verity's contributions to literature aren't worth twopence, that's why they're so popular. But in the realm of art the joy of creation is n't at all in ratio to the excellence of the thing you create. I don't suppose Shakespeare found more pleasure in writing *Romeo and Juliet* than I in scribbling my silly little tales; and if he disliked being interrupted half as much, I'm sorry for Ann Hathaway! No, Miggs, my mind is made up. We'll stay in town while I get on with my story, and, if possible, we won't let Lionel know we are here. And we won't go to Devonshire, because he would be certain to run down for week-ends, and I simply can't risk his distractions. I've just got to a critical point, and genius does so easily go off the boil!"

CHAPTER II

RETROSPECTIVE

CECILIA thought she was rather glad to be back in England.

On the whole, life had seemed good to her since she left home, though happiness had not come to her at the beginning in quite the form she anticipated. After the first intoxicating draught of liberty, the first rapture of breathing foreign air, the first delight in novel scenes and congenial companionship, she began to find that the brave new world was the same old world she had always known, and the freedom she had looked for but a gentler form of bondage.

Removed from familiar surroundings, Mrs. Thornton began to fail rapidly. The shock of her husband's death had struck deeper than any one suspected; some unseen bond that held her to existence was broken; she commenced to fade gently out of life. She had no pain and seemed to suffer no distress of mind. Easily and pleasantly, as she had gone through the world, sheltered and cared for, petted and loved, her feet went smoothly down the dark valley.

Far from suspecting how near the end was to be, the two girls tended her like daughters. Biddy was bright and blithe, tender and caressing, but all the

real responsibility and care fell upon Cecilia. Life was gay at Aix, and Biddy made friends easily. There was always some kindly elderly lady in the *pension* to take little Biddy for a drive or excursion, some gay young married woman to carry her off to a dance or picnic. It was not good, they said, for the child to spend all her time with an invalid. They thought it quite natural and right for Cecilia.

Cecilia did not quarrel with this division of labour. So little used to having her services claimed or appreciated, the clinging dependence of the sick woman touched and gratified her; there was a secret balm to her sensitive spirit, smarting under the sense of an obligation shamefully incurred, in repaying St. George's act of impulsive generosity with little daily deeds of kindness to his dying mother. Harry never knew of this speedy return from the bread he had cast on the waters. Biddy wrote enthusiastically to Bernard of Cecily's devotion; but Bernard did not think it necessary to pass on these raptures to his brother. He was grateful to his sister-in-law, and on his occasional visits to his mother really exerted himself to show his appreciation, but no genuine liking or friendship would flourish between them.

Mrs. Thornton showed her daughter-in-law affection as she was accustomed to show affection to those about her; she made her pretty, graceful little speeches and claimed her constant services. She liked to have her always at hand to read aloud to her, and sing her the old Irish airs she herself used to sing as a girl (she thought dear Cecily's voice charming, not at all unlike her own when she was young, and insisted on lessons); she appreciated her help with her fancy-work, and as a listener to the gentle, unfailing

flow of monologue that was its usual accompaniment.

It was principally Bernard who was the subject of her talk, and her dear Francis—Harry and Harry's father only appeared in casual reference, as a sort of background to throw up the brighter qualities of her second husband and her younger son. She inclined, indeed, to an apologetic tone when the conversation touched her first-born, as if she were introducing a topic which could not be of any interest to Cecilia. No fear of treading on delicate ground troubled her, but it was so natural that every one should prefer to speak of Bernard. If she had ever had any curiosity in the matter of her son's sudden, unexplained marriage or his relations with his wife, it had long since faded in the dim, vague mental haze with which her growing weakness was veiling all the circumstances of her life. Cecilia thought if St. George had had time to realize the condition of his mother's faculties, he need have taken no impetuous step to spare her the knowledge of any disturbing fact.

The one thing that stood clear, on the only occasion when she referred to the marriage, was her calm conviction that in some way or other her son had been to blame.

"Harry was always so wild," she said plaintively. "I always knew it would be a mistake for him to marry."

"It was not wildness that made him marry me," protested Cecilia, with some warmth. "It was nothing but kindness and goodness of heart."

Even against herself she could not bear that the son's generous effort to spare his mother should be so misjudged; and she knew the older woman's grasp

upon facts was so uncertain that no unguarded admission was likely to put her on the track of the truth.

"Oh, I didn't mean, my dear, that he was fast or bad in any way; at least, I never heard it if he was. Only that he is so sudden and unaccountable—so *untamed!* He was always the same from a child. As quite a little fellow he was constantly playing truant from his lessons to go fishing, or bird's-nesting, or 'exploring,' as he called it, and coming home all rags and scratches. When we came to England he was sent to school. And the first thing he did after he got there was to run away. He was gone for nearly a week. He wasn't bullied or unhappy; he said he didn't mind the school, but he wanted to see what sort of a country he was living in. Did you ever hear anything so extraordinary! As my husband said, what does his country matter to a boy as long as he can play cricket? But Harry hated the school games. He thought cricket a bore. It is difficult to know what to make of a boy who has ideas like that!"

"He stayed at school," Mrs. Thornton continued, after a long digression setting forth the details of Bernard's school and college life, "till he was seventeen. My husband always said that, considering the disposition the boy had, it was a credit to him that he stood it so long—Francis was always fond of Harry. I sometimes thought he really loved him better than Bernard, though Bernard was his own son. And then, one day, for no reason that anybody could understand, he ran away again and went to sea. He happened to be in Liverpool for a half-term holiday, and he saw a ship just about to sail, and he said it seemed all at once that he just *had* to go! He could

never give any other explanation. He was in no disgrace at school; he had got on quite well there and had plenty of friends; but he said it was as if something drew him to the ship with a steel hawser, whatever that may be. He went to the master; they were short of hands, and he was a well-grown boy for his age; so they took him, and he worked his way out to America before the mast, and I never knew where he was till he got to New York."

"You must have been terribly anxious," said Cecilia, with sympathy.

"I was anxious, of course. Not so much so as I might have been, perhaps, for Bernard got scarlet-fever just then and was very ill for some time, and that naturally kept my thoughts from dwelling on Harry. Besides, my husband said, a boy with as much impudence as he had wasn't likely to go under. Still, it was a great relief when we got a line from New York. He stayed in America more than two years. I don't know how he lived. From little hints he has let drop occasionally I am afraid he had rather a rough time and did the most dreadful things—not bad things, my dear, but not in the least respectable. I know once he hired himself out as a farmhand, and at one time was conductor on a street car, and I never knew which to feel most sorry for—the farmer or the people on the car. He mentioned those two things, he said, because he thought I would be pleased to hear that he wasn't always disreputable, so what he was doing when he was disreputable I have always preferred not to think. He never would write home for money, or let us know where he was, and he worked his way back to England again on a sailing-vessel. He shipped as cook, I believe, but before they had been twenty-four

hours at sea they had to put him at something else. He said when he considered the stuff he gave them to eat he wondered they didn't hang him from the yard-arm. But people were always good to Harry. He had an Irish tongue when he cared to use it, and he was always good-tempered and ready to make friends with the most shocking characters."

"And then?" questioned Cecilia, who found these disgraceful episodes more entertaining than the story of Bernard's stainless career.

"Well, then he stayed in England for a few years. My husband thought he might go into the Army, and he took fairly kindly to the idea, though he found it rather difficult to settle down to regular studies after his roving life. And just about that time the trouble in the Sudan was coming to a head, and Harry thought it too hard to be out of the fun. He was at a crammer's at Putney then, but he walked out of the house one morning and enlisted as a private soldier, and again I heard nothing of him till I got a cable from him after the fall of Omdurman. We bought him out of the Army after that, and had him home, and he was fairly quiet till the Boer War broke out, when he went to South Africa with one of the first irregular corps, and we saw no more of him for two or three years. I knew by this time it was useless to expect him to settle down to any proper profession, and as his uncle had died and left him his money it didn't really matter. Since the war he has wandered about in all parts of the world, sampling different kinds of lives, as he says, and whenever there is any fighting within a hundred miles of him he is never happy unless he is in the thick of it. That is the sort of man Harry is."

"I like men of that sort," said Cecilia, her eyes kindling. "I admire and envy them. They may not make the best citizens, but they make empires!"

"Perhaps, my dear," said Mrs. Thornton, placidly turning her work, "but they make very uncomfortable husbands."

Cecilia made no attempt to discuss this irrelevance. She went on winding wool, with flushed cheeks and dreamy eyes, while the pretty, plaintive voice took up the tale of Bernard's merits and achievements and wrongs and the regrettable oversight of Providence in allowing ample means to the elder brother when the younger one could have done so much more with them.

"But you told me that Harry had done a great deal for Bernard," Cecilia pointed out.

"Why, my dear, I don't see anything particularly generous in Harry's helping his only brother when he was always ready to squander his money on all sorts of other worthless people. That was the weakness of all the St. Georges, except Harry's uncle Henry, who left him his money, and I never could imagine how he got into the family. I am sure Hugh, my husband, would have been a trial to any wife. As soon as he heard a tale of distress his hand was in his pocket. Nothing was too much to do to help a friend. And Harry is his father's own son—with just the same reckless, headlong generosity, never thinking of consequences or counting the cost."

"But that is a nice way to be helped," said Cecilia wistfully.

"It may be," said Mrs. Thornton, in the impersonal tone of one who knew nothing about it. Then seeing the girl still looked troubled, she laughed gently

and patted her cheek, and told her she was a good wife to stand up for her husband, and began to prattle inconsequently of Bernard's childish ailments, till sleep stole softly over her and left her hearer free.

Those were not at all unhappy days to Cecilia. Her time was occupied, but she felt herself of use, a golden compensation to the diffident and self-distrustful, and the dependence of the invalid called out qualities and resources she had never believed she possessed. At the same time she was far from suspecting the gravity of the illness she tended, and her gentle affection for the sufferer gave her none of the agonized misgivings of watchful love. Her nursing did not take up all her time; there were hours when her charge could be left to the care of Truman, and she was free to ramble as she pleased and make herself acquainted with her new surroundings. Years afterwards, when the sight of many foreign cities had dimmed the features of that gay little watering-place in her memory, the sensations stirred in her by this her first venture into an unknown world were as keen in her mind as ever: the sunshine and gaiety of the town, the novelty of its people and its setting, the beauty of the lake and the mountains, the occasional flash of realization that she was in a foreign country, so delightful to the unaccustomed traveller, the breathless experience of airing her schoolgirl French, the amazed delight of finding herself at times actually understood.

She took small part in the social life of the place, but even as a looker-on the freshness of the types she met interested her and kindled her imagination. She delighted in Biddy's gay companionship, and their

girlish talks together in their room at night were a source of never-failing delight.

And then, quite suddenly, the frail thread binding her to this new life snapped. There was no violence of suffering, no agonized clinging to life. A few hours' illness, a gradual sinking, and a peaceful passing from sleep to the last unconsciousness. Bernard, hastily summoned, arrived too late to see his mother alive.

He found the two girls in charge of a kindly American family, at whose house Biddy had been a frequent visitor for some weeks past. Cecilia had more than once accompanied her, and it was here she had first made Miss Verrinder's acquaintance.

Meeting her in a strongly transatlantic atmosphere, she had fallen into the usual error concerning Salome's nationality; but her mistake was soon made clear to her.

"I am London born and Devonshire bred," said Sallie. "My father was a professor at one of the Western colleges of America, and when I left school I went out to him, and afterwards travelled about a good bit in the States. I believe it is considered a compliment to an English girl to tell her she looks American; but I don't like compliments at the expense of my country, and if you are going to intimate that I have caught the American accent you shall never hear my voice again."

Destiny, however, had decreed that Cecilia was to hear more of Miss Verrinder's voice—to hear, indeed, a great deal more of it. The death of her mother-in-law had left her wondering what she was going to do with herself. The Kings were about to continue their European tour, taking Salome with them. Bernard Thornton, more handsome and inter-

esting than ever in his deep mourning, and gentle and softened from his bereavement, was urging Biddy to return to England and marry him without delay, and Biddy, softened herself by sympathy, was lending a half-yielding ear to his beguilements. There seemed no place in any of their plans for Cecilia. Then Fate gave her kaleidoscope a little turn and all the pieces fell into new combinations. The Kings were recalled to America by urgent family business, and Salome, left disconsolate, suggested to Biddy that she should join her in a Continental ramble, adding, as an afterthought, that Mrs. St. George might form a third in the party.

She made this last proposal not, it is to be confessed, from any particular desire for the company of Cecilia, with whom her acquaintance had made no great strides, but for a reason which she frankly admitted in repeating her suggestion to Mrs. St. George in person a few days later.

"You see, my home is in Devonshire, and Mrs. Grundy still lives in Devonshire. It would make just all the difference to my dear little Aunt Clarissa, who brought me up, and all the dear little old maiden ladies, her bosom friends, to say nothing of my sister Elizabeth and my excellent brother-in-law, if Biddy and I had a married woman travelling with us. You are decidedly the least married of all the married people I know. Will you join us?"

The invitation thus worded was none too flattering, but backed up by Biddy's more eager pleadings Cecilia accepted it—with the happiest results. Between Salome and herself the marriage of convenience, as it might be called, developed with time into a union of pure affection, and she now looked back on their

Wanderjahre together as the happiest in her life. The triple alliance, or *Kleeblatt*, as Biddy named it, from the first knew nothing but harmony. In their relations to one another they formed a very fair representation of the great human trinity. Salome, on the strength of a trifling seniority and the fact that she alone of the party could thread her way through Bradshaw and add up hotel bills compiled in the bewildering simplicity of a decimal coinage, and divide them by three with anything like impartiality, was the man of the company; Cecilia, from her married title and more sedate appearance, the matron; while Biddy was the petted, light-hearted, irresponsible child. They journeyed with as little encumbrance as possible, more concerned with what they wanted to see than the conditions under which they saw it. The simplicity of their equipment and lodging and the shifts of travel provided constant food for mirth. They were young and healthy; they saw Europe through gay, girlish eyes, and a very delightful old Europe they found it.

None of them had too much money or too much learning to bless themselves with, but Salome knew a little of art, Cecilia a little of history, and Biddy a little of music. They visited famous galleries, they listened to famous performers, they dreamed among historic ruins, and knelt in the jewelled dusk of renowned cathedrals; they watched the shifting human pageant at the gathering-places of the nations, and brought to the spectacle the quick observation, the sympathetic intuition, and the merry wit of their happy holiday humour. They met with some adventures, they had some curious experiences, and they not infrequently had to pay for outbursts of extrava-

gance with amusing expedients of economy; there was some ground, perhaps, for Bernard's disgusted contention that they spent all their money on curiosities and sightseeing and lived upon omelettes and confectionery.

Almost from the first Biddy had pursued her unthinking way under a bombardment of protesting letters from her betrothed. As the weeks grew into months, and there was no mention of her return, these communications ranged through all the stages of pleading, diplomacy, and despair.

At first the unhappy lover tried cajolery: he had been making a pot of money in Rhodesians, wouldn't Biddy come home and help him to spend it? He had been looking at a house the other day which he was sure she would like; the rent was remarkably reasonable and the Adams chimneypiece quite her taste, etc. Then he took a sterner tone: he had just met Major Jerome and learned from him that Biddy had overdrawn her banking account; would she think him impertinent and officious if he inquired if she were starving in some foreign garret, or living by the pawning of her trinkets or the bounty of her friends? Again, he tried the wiles of jealousy: he had been spending his week-ends lately with Cowley at his place on the river. Mrs. Cowley had her sister staying with her, a Miss Ross, a lovely girl. He had asked them to come up and do a theatre with him and have supper at the Carlton. P.S.—He was sure Biddy would admire Miss Ross's voice. Or, on Sunday evening he wrote: He had been in the afternoon to have a look at the old house and had walked through Kensington Gardens and had sat for a long time on the bench where they had been sitting when Biddy

first promised to marry him. Did she remember? London was a beastly desolate hole to a man who had to spend all his days in work and his evenings in solitude. Finally, on a tragic note: since Biddy evidently preferred the companionship of Miss Verrinder and Cecilia to his, and was apparently going to spend her life touring the Continent in their society, would she kindly tell him how long she intended to keep up the farce of their engagement?

To the onslaught of these heavy guns Biddy responded with a light running fire of picture-postcards, thoughtlessly directed to Bernard's office, for the entertainment of his office-boy, himself a collector, imploring her *fiancé* not to be a goose, and on pain of their eternal separation to refrain from bothering her with any talk of marriage, for she was having the time of her life and never expected to be so happy again.

It was towards the end of the year when Bernard's sorely-tried patience at length gave way, and he appeared in person to claim his reluctant bride. He found the trio at Heidelberg, where they were enjoying themselves remarkably well, each in her separate fashion: Salome collecting material for her next masterpiece from an interesting and interested young Herr Professor; Cecilia dreaming about the castle; and Biddy merrily flirting, or, as she explained to her mentors, Sallie and Cecilia, adjusting international differences, with a wonderfully good-looking young American student.

On this peaceful and idyllic setting burst Bernard and his thunderbolts. There was a scene of storm—reproaches and reprisals, anger, defiance, pleading, tears, melting, and caresses. Biddy appeared, red-

eyed, from a final interview with her *fiancé*, piteously informing her friends that she supposed she had got to be married sometime, and she had just better go home to England and get it over as soon as possible, whereupon the whole party returned to London for the wedding.

After this Sallie and Cecilia departed again for a winter in Rome. But the second temple was not like the first. Salome was absorbed in her writing, and Cecilia missed "the child." The Eternal City cast its age-long glamour over her, and she spent many hours of pensive enjoyment among the monuments and memories of the past; but she was not as disappointed as she might have been when her friend, returning from a brief visit to England, declared that for the present Europe had ceased to inspire her, and she was resolved on a visit to America. Her brother, who was ranching out West, was always asking her to come out to him. Cecil should go with her and have a glimpse of New York and Boston and Chicago, and feel how worth while it was to be a woman, as she would never learn it in a hundred years in a London suburb, no, nor yet in a Devonshire village.

Cecilia was not wrong in connecting this sudden flitting with the pertinacities of Salome's brother-in-law's brother, whose correspondence throughout their European wanderings had been a sort of mild imitation of Bernard's cannonade.

"But if I go to America now, he will be too disgusted to bother me for a little while," said Sallie, with a wicked smile. "He is a most unreasonable person. He never approves of anything I do; he simply abominates Sarah Verity and all her works; he cannot understand why I choose to wander about

Europe in my present disreputable fashion instead of staying at home and playing tennis and golf all the year round like all the other good Devonshire girls, and yet he has the curious delusion that if we were once married we should be a perfect Darby and Joan. He is always pointing out how happy my sister is with his brother, as if we were a kind of sum in proportion, and as Elizabeth is to Godfrey, so should Salome be to Lionel. But Salome's fourth term is still x. However, I'm not going to run the risk of marrying him one day in a fit of absence of mind, and absence of body is the only real safeguard. We'll go Westward Ho! Miggs."

So Westward Ho! Cecilia went, and sometimes wondered if she had ever known what it was to live before. After her year on the Continent, with its cathedrals and castles, its mouldering palaces and crumbling monuments, its ancient, foot-worn highways, where she had wistfully strained her eyes down the long vista of the centuries to catch faint visions of the past, she seemed to turn a complete *volte-face* and to find herself confronting the future, throbbing with life and energy, vague with undreamt-of wonders, bewildering with the rush and whirr of many inventions. But she had no time to dream over contrasts. She was whirled from one city to another; impression rapidly succeeded impression, till it seemed to her she had scarcely time to think or breathe.

Looking back, the experience appeared brief and unreal as a dream, and yet it was a dream that lasted many months. It was spring-time again in England when she and her friend finally returned, and, accepting the loan of a flat from an acquaintance, settled down for a few weeks in London.

In all this time the figure of her husband had become vague and unsubstantial to Cecilia. She never spoke of him, and rarely gave him a place in her thoughts. He was right away at the other side of the world; in all probability they would never meet again. The marriage tie sat lightly on her; the peculiar conditions of her union had as yet caused her little embarrassment. There were times in the still of night when the bargain she had made seemed a dreadful thing to her, and she had hid a hot, shamed face against her pillows; but in practical daylight her conscience could be lulled to rest. Only on one occasion, when the sting of her dependence on a man on whom she had no moral claim stirred her at last to decided action, she wrote to his solicitor and said she would accept no more quarterly payments from her husband. The effect of this declaration of independence had been to bring her in the course of time the one and only communication she had received from St. George since their marriage. His letter was formal in address but forcible in expression, and in some way managed to convey so strongly the idea that in repudiating the conditions of her marriage Mrs. St. George's behaviour would be unfair and unsportsmanlike, that Cecilia, almost bewildered into thinking she had been guilty of something base, ventured no further protests.

CHAPTER III

THE KLEEBLATT

ONE of the first visitors to appear at the flat was Biddy.

She sprang from the lift like a gay-plumaged bird from a cage and threw herself into the arms of her friends with ecstatic hugs.

"You dear things, how lovely to see you in England again! And how sweet and nice and just like yourselves you look! I haven't been so happy since I was married."

"We hope to look even more like ourselves shortly," remarked Salome gravely. "At present we are a pair of battered old wanderers with scarcely a rag to our backs, while you—why, what a gorgeous chickabiddy it is!" turning her round gently. "Why this splendour just to come and see two old friends?"

"I've been paying duty calls," sighed Biddy, relapsing into a chair and drawing off her gloves. "Stupid, tedious things! I thought I should never get away. And I was dying all the time to be here. I want to hear everything that has happened to you since we parted, and to tell you about my little Jerome. Oh, Cecily! He's a darling! I don't know whether I ever mentioned it in my letters, but he really is the dearest baby in the world! I try to pretend when

I'm with other mothers that I think there have been babies as dear and beautiful in the world before, but I know quite well in my heart that there never have, or could be. Cecily, throw a cushion at that monster on the sofa; I believe she is laughing at me. Now I shan't ask about any of her children, and I had come prepared with all the proper inquiries."

"There's nothing much to tell just now," said Salome. "My youngest isn't out of arms yet, but the youngest but one is beginning to walk a little, isn't it, Miggs?"

"It's running," said Cecilia eagerly. "They are talking already of a third edition. It's so good, Biddy."

"I know," said Biddy, nodding. "I've read it. I didn't mean to say anything nice to her because she doesn't deserve it, but, oh, Sallie dear, it was lovely! I enjoyed it more than I could say. I simply wept pints over the last part—so much so that Bernard had to take the book away from me. Don't let your next be quite so sad."

"I didn't mean that one to be, but it grew so. My children, like other people's children, sometimes turn out quite differently from what I intended. You may find how easily that happens one day, Biddy, with your little Jerome."

"If you two parents," observed Cecilia, "are going to spend the whole afternoon discussing your offspring, I shall have tea alone. I've been offering Biddy a cup for the last five minutes, and she won't look at it."

Biddy received the tea with profuse apologies, but jumped up a minute later to admire the wide sweep of view from the open window.

"What a delightful little eyrie you have up here

all to your two own selves! What lovely times you must have! I wish I could come and stay with you. It would be like the old days of the *Kleeblatt*. *Kinder*, what days those were! What an idiot I was ever to leave you to come home and be married."

"But if you hadn't," suggested Cecilia, "you must remember that you would not now be the mother of the dearest baby in the world."

"That is true," admitted Biddy, subsiding to her tea again, "and he really is worth any sacrifice, the darling! I'm dying to show him to you and have your perfectly candid and impartial opinion of him, and if you don't agree with me that there never was such a baby I shan't want to speak to either of you again. The most fascinating little rings of gold all over his dear head, and such eyes! Just like Bernard's, and you know," with an air of giving the devil no more than his due, "Bernard really has good eyes."

"Oh, very!" Cecilia assented, with the somewhat hypocritical fervour she and her friend, on principle, always put into their praises of Bernard to his wife. Between themselves they had many times agreed that they would not have married Bernard Thornton if he had been the last man on earth, but since the child was married to him, it was not for them to encourage her in discontent.

Recalled to a sense of her duty, Cecilia added a polite inquiry after the health of her brother-in-law.

"He's very well, I believe," his wife answered perfunctorily. "He was in rather a bad temper this morning because the market was up or down—I forget which, but it was the one Bernard didn't want it to be—and we didn't speak to one another at breakfast. You needn't shake your head at me,

Cecily. It wasn't a bad quarrel. Bernard wouldn't risk a real row for his life. He would have to make it up with me afterwards, and nothing would bother or embarrass him more. You see, he might possibly be betrayed into something like sentiment or demonstration, and think how dreadful, with your own wife! And yet," she went on slowly, "though you mightn't think it, Bernard really is rather fond of me in his own fashion. I could tell that by the way he swore at the nurse and doctor when I was ill—but 'whether it was worth going through so much to find out so little,' as the charity boy said when he had got through the alphabet, 'is a matter of opinion.' "

"Oh, come, Biddy, don't be cynical," said Sallie, faithful to the principle. "It doesn't go with your dimples. Tell us some more about the best and most beautiful baby in the world."

Biddy was easily diverted from the failings of her husband to the perfections of her little son. She produced with pride a portrait of that matchless infant which, she admitted, so far as any mere photograph could, did some justice to his charms.

"Even as a photograph," she declared, striving after an air of impartial candour, "you must admit it makes a charming picture. It was a wickedly expensive place I had it taken at. I couldn't have afforded the price they asked if the whole thing hadn't been a present from the baby's godfather. He said as soon as Jerry was six months old I was to take him to the very best studio in London and get the finest picture of him money could buy. It was really rather nice of a man to think of a thing like that."

Cecilia suddenly busied herself with pouring out a cup of tea that nobody wanted. She knew that

Harry St. George was Jerry's godfather, as she was his godmother. At the opposite ends of the world they had stood together by proxy as sponsors to Biddy's child. There was not the remotest earthly chance that their sponsorial responsibilities would ever bring them in contact with one another, but even this shadowy suggestion of a personal relationship filled her with an uneasy misgiving.

"Talking of photographs," Sallie broke into the conversation, "I want to show you Cecily's latest, Biddy. She had it taken in Paris last year, and the copies were forwarded to us in America. I've just unearthed them from our baggage."

She rose and disappeared into the adjoining room and, left alone, Biddy turned to her sister-in-law with that little accession of confidence which even in the most devoted triangular friendship marks the change from three in company to two.

"Now you are settled here, I wish I could get you and Sallie to come to dinner with me one day next week, Cecily, and—and smoke the pipe of peace with Bernard."

"Biddy, dear!"

"Oh, I know you're all right," said Biddy hastily, "but I don't think Sallie has ever got over that little falling-out they had at the time of my wedding. Really, Cecily, I don't think she took Bernard quite rightly. I'm perfectly aware that he has a trying temper—you know I never defend him—but I don't think in this case he was so altogether in the wrong as Sallie thought him. And it's all so long ago—and you two are my dearest friends. I can't bear that anything should keep us apart."

"Biddy, darling, nothing ever could. I'm sure

Sallie will come to your house with pleasure; she has no feeling of ill-will whatever towards Bernard. Only you know there is no real compatibility of any sort between them. They disagree on almost every subject. I think it's really better for them not to have too much to do with one another. It's no use trying to force a friendship. Some people are born to be more comfortable apart."

"And I suppose you won't want to come and see me often, either?" said Biddy wistfully, after a little downcast silence.

"Whenever you are alone," returned Cecilia, colouring slightly. "I would rather not meet any of your personal friends who know—the rest of your family—very well."

Biddy was silent again, twirling her rings with an air of hesitation and doubt. Once she opened her lips to speak, but some impulse checked her words. The thought in her mind was still unspoken when Sallie returned with the photographs.

"Sallie delights to cover me with confusion by showing these things to my friends in my presence," said Cecilia, laughing. "You see, as a photograph it flatters me so outrageously that very few people recognize it as meant for me at all, and the explanation is sometimes most embarrassing."

"I don't think it flatters you as much as that," declared Biddy, regarding her judicially. "It has only caught you at your very best, and then idealized you a little."

"And you don't call that flattery?"

"Perhaps if people don't really think it is meant for you," said Biddy, returning to the pictured face, "it is because you have signed it 'Celia.'"

"I have signed only that one which is meant for you, so. You know I told you once about Celia—that bright, impossible ideal of my youth, who was everything that I should have liked to be, and, as Cecilia, felt I never could be. If Celia had ever materialized she might possibly have resembled that girl in the photograph, but I am not in the least like either. I thought it better to label the picture as the ideal it is."

"I don't think the photograph as unlike you as that," observed Sallie thoughtfully, "and probably you are nearer to your Celia-ideal than you imagine; but for common, everyday use I prefer you as Miggs. It reminds me of that first evening at the Kings', and Dolly Varden. Do you remember, Biddy?"

"Shall I ever forget?" asked Biddy, and she fell into the old refrain: "*Kinder*, that was the time of my life! Why *did* I get married?"

When Salome returned to the drawing-room from seeing the visitor into the lift, Cecilia laid Biddy's invitation before her.

"Bless the dear little chickabiddy!" exclaimed Sallie with some compunction. "I'll go to her house with pleasure. There never was anything the least serious in my disagreement with Bernard, really, Miggs, but it is always a fatal thing for anybody who has a sense of humour to pretend to quarrel with somebody who hasn't. I think it's safer for me not to try to have too much to do with Biddy's husband, but I'm quite willing to be his guest for one evening. I'm very certain that all the time I'm there I shall be so intensely thankful that I'm not married to him that I shall almost love him for being only my host."

Cecilia did not smile in response. "You don't think

that Biddy is really unhappy with him?" she asked anxiously.

Sallie knitted her eyebrows with the effect of a shrug.

"The happiness or the unhappiness of my married friends," she said sententiously, "is a thing about which I, as a spinster, rarely presume to judge. It seems as much a point of honour with some wives to give an impression of being uncongenially yoked, when they are not, as it is with others to prevent you getting that impression when they are. Because it would make me feel suicidal to be Bernard Thornton's wife, it doesn't follow that it makes Biddy so. She must have found something more likeable about him than I ever did to marry him at all. You see, though she was never in love with him, he was with her, for years; and a persistent lover like that—unless a woman is very strong-minded—does get to seem a sort of figure of destiny to her. And when a man once establishes himself as your destiny it is astonishing how endurable he becomes. It is the thought that you might have done better which makes the peculiar sting of an ill-assorted marriage."

"How wise you are, Sallie!" said Cecilia, with a smile.

"Well, I should be. Isn't Salome the feminine of Solomon?"

She shook up the crumpled cushions on the sofa with an abstracted air. Cecilia watched her doubtfully.

"What are you smiling at?"

"I didn't know that I was smiling. I was only thinking what a lot of worry we waste. Here are you bothering yourself whether Biddy is happy, and the

first thing Biddy asked about you when we were alone together was if you were."

Cecilia turned away to the window.

"Are you, Cecil?" asked Sallie gently, addressing the question to the back of her friend's head.

"Yes," said the other, staring out of the window. "I suppose I ought not to be, but I am—far, far happier than if I had stayed on in the suburbs with John and Emmeline and never made that outrageous marriage. I've had too much good from the liberty it gave me to regret the price that I paid for it."

"Are you quite sure that you have paid the price?"

Cecilia turned quickly. "Sallie, what do you mean?"

"Oh," said Sallie remorsefully, "that was an idotic thing to say. I didn't mean anything by it. Only—well, the fact remains, you have still got a husband——"

"But he is at the other end of the world. He doesn't interfere with me."

"But, Cecil dear, he can't always stay at the other end of the world. That was one of the things Biddy wanted me alone to tell me. Her brother-in-law is expected in England before the end of the month."

CHAPTER IV

STRANGERS YET

SALOME came into the dining-room of the flat where Cecilia, sitting in the window with the morning paper in her hand, was letting an abstracted gaze wander over the wide prospect before her.

"Here's a note from Helen West asking us to lunch with her and see pictures."

Cecilia put down the paper. "Helen West? That is your sister-in-law's sister, and she is married to your brother-in-law's brother?" she said, with a smile. She was often amused at Sallie's extensive family connection, but she followed its intricacies with interest—an interest not untouched by envy, remembering her own colourless, uncompanioned youth.

"That's it," returned Sallie, laughing, "and it is quite a close connection—relationships always sound more involved than they are. Helen Wyndham married Godfrey West's brother Harold—all my friends have fallen into the habit of marrying one another lately. We're all cousins and 'in-laws' in our part of the world now. They 're in town for a visit, and Nell wants me to go with her to see her cousin Anthony Wyndham's pictures."

"I'm afraid among all the 'in-laws' I should feel rather an outlaw," said Cecilia, smiling.

"Oh, we are not so savagely tribal as all that. And you would like Tony's pictures. I believe they're very good."

"I can't come, really, Sallie. I promised to go and see Emmeline to-day. Besides——"

"Besides what?" asked Sallie, pausing with her hand on the door.

"Oh, nothing. Run away and enjoy yourself and 'reminisce' to your heart's content. And if you should see anything of Lionel, as you probably will among all that crowd of connections, give him my love and ask him here to lunch on Sunday."

Sallie laughed, paused in the doorway, then came back and kissed her friend.

"I wish your husband's name were Smith."

"I wish I hadn't any husband at all," said Cecilia.

After more than two years' unmolested enjoyment of her matrimonial bargain, Fate was beginning to send in the bill. Harry St. George had been a couple of weeks in England, at his brother's house, and his wife had not known an easy moment since. A husband at the other end of the world might be dismissed as a dim abstraction; a husband in the same country, the same town, even though that town was London, a world in itself, was a disconcerting reality. A meeting with him was a constant menace. Salome quoted statistics regarding the population of London in vain. Cecilia took her stand on the perversity of Fate.

Nor was this dread all. As if repenting of past inactivity, Nemesis seemed, to St. George's wife, to be showing a malignant ingenuity in devising fresh

embarrassment for her. For years her husband had wandered over the globe and no man had marked his comings or his goings. Now things were changed. A short time before had occurred one of those disturbances on the outposts of the Empire about which the homegrown Englishman is apt as a rule to concern himself but little. Smouldering disaffection among a native tribe blazed up in sudden revolt. There were disquieting rumours, troops were hurriedly dispatched to the mutinous district, and after a few weeks of alarms and excursions, the rebellion, such as it was, was entirely subdued. The whole business was managed with such promptitude and efficiency that it was signalized by no striking disaster, and was scarcely expected to excite even a nine-days' wonder. It happened at the time, however, that no event of national importance was occupying the public mind. No Colonial cricket or football team was disputing the Home supremacy, no foreign jockey had carried off the blue ribbon of the turf; Englishmen were able to give their attention to the minor matters of Empire. The rising in East Edwardsland was given a prominent place on the placards. The Society for the Protection of Aborigines raised its voice; a little flutter of controversy gave the matter unexpected fame.

St. George, being in the vicinity at the time, had been hurried by that character which is destiny to the scene of action and took a vigorous part in the work of repression, his intimate knowledge of the place and the people making his services of value; and Fate, who seems to carry men's names in a hat and settle reputations by a chance shake, allowed on this occasion that of St. George to come to the top. He figured in a picturesque incident which caught the popular

fancy; his photograph appeared in the illustrated papers, some journalist remembered that he had done good work in the South African War, some interesting episodes of his career were revived and a good many more invented, and Harry returned to England to find himself in the enjoyment of a little brief newspaper notoriety.

In this fame Cecilia found herself, to her horror, in danger of sharing. Strangers introduced would persist in asking her if she were related to *the* St. George, and the sudden interest with which she was regarded by those who knew her history, added to her lively terror of meeting her husband in person, had turned her in the last few weeks into something of a recluse. Oxen and wain-ropes would scarcely have drawn her within a mile of Biddy's house, and even in Salome's less danger-haunted circle she knew no peace of mind.

At this juncture, when her marriage was beginning to appear to her an unredeemed evil, a return to the home of her discontented girlhood seemed likely to have a salutary effect on the mind. She had seen her brother and his wife since her return, but not in their own house. Decidedly the best thing for her would be to spend a day with Emmeline.

Some hours later, the visit paid, she sat in a carriage on the suburban line that carried her away from the once familiar neighbourhood, conscious of a purpose achieved.

The first impression of her own home had been not unfavourable. A bright sunny morning glorifies even a London suburb. On her walk across the common to the house Cecilia had wondered if her girlish repinings had always been reasonable, and if circum-

stances quite justified the extreme step of her marriage. But almost with the first words of Mrs. Ward's greeting the old chill fell on her spirit. The old life, colourless and limited, the same petty interests and manufactured duties, Emmeline's unchanged gift of transmuting all the gold of existence to leaden metal and its poetry to dreary prose, the stifling atmosphere of red brick—nothing was altered. She felt deep pity for Emmeline. Life had changed so for herself; it had a hundred facets now from which to catch colour and sparkle, and to her brother's wife everything stood at the same dull level. But if that level had still been hers—if there had been no afternoon train to carry her away from it! Whatever happened, she was, she always must be, grateful to Harry St. George.

Unknowingly, she had fixed her visit for Emmeline's At Home day. She had not regretted the fact when the latter first announced it to her. These "days" had never been exciting functions. How often she and her sister had sat through the long afternoon in solitary state while the latter went over the names of the acquaintances she expected and the probable reasons that had kept them all away. How often she had wished herself away when some tedious visitor stayed and stayed!—it was only the tedious visitors who lingered at Braeside. But a *tête-à-tête* conversation offered no greater attraction. Quite early in the morning she and her sister-in-law had exhausted all that they really had to say to one another.

The latter, however, had been almost complimentary over her visitor's immense improvement in what she called style—in Emmeline's own way, of course, with chastening reflections on the very different

figure she had cut in the past—and perhaps Cecilia had a secret unconfessed willingness that some of the old acquaintances she was assured would scarcely have recognized her—Miss Orville-Grant, for instance—should witness her metamorphosis.

To her surprise, however, she found that her presence in the drawing-room was not desired. Mrs. Ward was hesitating and apologetic, but the truth came out at last. She was not sure what her friends would think of her sister's matrimonial standing—it was so odd, so unusual! Of course, when one was travelling about nothing of the sort mattered. On the Continent nothing could seem improper, and in America, with their dreadful divorce laws, probably few people knew themselves whether they were legally married or cared if they were not. But here in the suburbs it was different. People didn't make marriage arrangements like Cecilia's—she had never felt herself that it was *right*. That wasn't the end for which marriage was ordained. And now that Mr. St. George's name had got into the papers people were sure to ask questions—and Cecilia herself must see it was awkward.

Cecilia saw—with the gently derisive humour she kept for the quenching of her rare ebullitions of vanity and egotism—that in place of being welcomed to shed a lustre upon a Braeside At Home day with her smartened appearance and travelled manner, she was to be hustled out of the way at the first signs of a caller as a person of doubtful respectability. She laughed at her own expense, but even now in the train she winced a little at the recollection. She could not laugh as she would have liked at the suburban prejudices of her sister and her friends.

For once in her life some inward feeling in herself joined sides with Emmeline and condemned her.

But with regard to visitors the latter had disquieted herself in vain. Her only callers were a mother and daughter who had never known Miss Ward, and who were so absorbed in discussing the marriage of the curate of St. Clement's to the vicar's daughter—so far had matters progressed since Cecilia left home—that they never troubled whether she were married or single.

She told herself that the one great mistake in life was to imagine that your own affairs were of any particular interest to other people. Perhaps Sallie was right, and it was not necessary for her to keep aloof from friends and acquaintances—from those who were willing to associate with some one not quite respectably married. The fear of chance meetings with her husband after all was negligible; the world was not quite so small as one was apt to think.

The train when she entered it had been unusually crowded, but at the next station there was a general clearance, and she was left alone in her carriage with one man. He sat at the farther end, on the same side as herself, leaning his elbow upon the division between them, and shading his face with his hand. He was reading what looked like one of the reviews and seemed too absorbed in it to lift his eyes. Cecilia took up an illustrated ladies' paper which somebody had left on the seat and idly turned the pages.

Just as the train was about to leave the station, a passenger got in and made his way to the end of the carriage. The man who was reading looked up.

"Hullo, St. George!" exclaimed the newcomer, dropping into the seat opposite. "Back from the wilds, eh?"

The paper trembled in Cecilia's hands. It seemed to her that the whole carriage rocked. Her heart gave one leap and went on beating in such suffocating throbs that she almost thought that the men must hear it above the rattle of the train. But she had the presence of mind to keep the paper as a screen between them, and her fellow-passengers talked on calmly, in the English fashion, as if she were non-existent.

"I didn't know you were in London," continued the new arrival, settling in his seat. "Come to see the little tame mice run round their cage?"

The other laughed. If Cecilia had retained any doubt of his identity that laugh would have dispelled it. And the voice that replied was unmistakably St. George's voice, which she had last heard on the day of their marriage, uttering the words that made her his wife. The shock of these associations prevented her catching the first words of his reply.

"See how they run indeed!" he was saying, when she was calm enough to listen. "Every time I come home I find them moving a little bit faster. But what's the good of that when you don't get anywhere? You might just as well have been standing still."

His companion laughed. "Well, you seem to have been moving a bit in East Edwardsland lately. Gad, St. George, you got in for something good there!"

Cecilia subdued her foolish, feminine tremors and trepidations to listen to the conversation. Apart from the identity of the speakers—of one speaker—she felt keen interest in their talk. She knew that "something good" in the Englishman's parlance meant something comprising danger and hardship. In this present case she was aware that it had meant weary marches and short rations, waterless days and

sleepless nights, and death menacing every hour in a hundred hideous shapes; yet the gentleman of England who had lived at home at ease spoke of this experience with unfeigned envy, and his friend, who had been through it, received his congratulations soberly, almost apologetic for his own good fortune.

"Yes, we had rather a jolly time for a bit. But it didn't last long. We soon smashed the brutes."

"Good for you. But a certain portion of the British public, I suppose you know, is by way of taking it rather amiss that you didn't let the brutes smash you."

"A certain portion of the British public will always consist of well-meaning asses. I know what they say, but they don't know what they are talking about. They talked the same sort of rot, you remember, after the Amalonga affair. By Jove, Duffield, I wish they had gone through the country those devils had been harrying, as we did, and seen the sights we saw."

The other nodded without speaking, staring out of the window at the trim, tame suburban scenery through which they were passing.

A breath of her old discontent at the limitations of her woman's lot seized the third occupant of the compartment. She had no morbid desire for horrors, but in that they had looked on life when it was real, and stared death in the face, she envied these men. She looked with disgust at the posing, mincing dames on the pages of her paper, creatures only designed to carry so much frill and frippery, and resented the feminine futility to which she saw herself condemned along with them.

"Yes," said the man opposite, drawing a long breath in response to some remark of his friend's, "those days when we were out with Winstanley's

column weren't half bad. I'm rather sorry to think I shan't see any more of them."

"Why shouldn't you? There's likely to be plenty more of that sort of fun if we live a little longer."

"Oh, well, I'm afraid they'll have to do without me. You see, I'm married now. That sort of business is no game for a married man."

"Married, is it? You silly fellow! What did you do that for?"

"The usual thing, I suppose. It's kismet. It comes to us all. Sooner or later we all drop from the ranks of good bachelors. And, by Jove, St. George, one might do worse. You should see my boy!"

"Thanks. I've seen plenty of 'em."

"Not like this one. There isn't such another youngster in the kingdom. My wife tells me so."

"Well, I'm glad you're satisfied."

The train drew up with a jerk.

"This your station?" asked Harry.

"No, the next but one. It's no use living too far out. You see, I'm on the staff of the *Daily Wire* now, and I don't want to spend all my spare hours in railway trains."

"In such a hurry to get back to the warm hearthstone? Ah, Duff, to think of you!"

"Why, hang it all, man! What's there so remarkable about it? It's the common lot. You'll do it yourself one of these days."

"Never!" said St. George emphatically. Then he caught himself up. Cecilia could not see his face, but she knew he was smiling—she could fancy his twisted, half-satirical smile. "At least, I shan't get married. I've got a wife already."

"The deuce you have!" said the other, staring.

"You've kept her jolly quiet! I've heard all sorts of things about you in the last few weeks, but I never heard you were married."

"You've heard all sorts of lies, I've not a doubt, but this is true, you can take it from me, though you needn't publish it in your rag of a paper. My wife, d'you see, isn't in England, and we don't exactly correspond."

"Not a row?" said his friend bluntly.

"Oh, no—mutual arrangement. Our relations are perfectly amicable and always have been, but we don't want our marriage generally discussed. Mrs. St. George is in America at the present moment, lecturing on Woman's Rights."

"Well, she seemed to know something about them," remarked Duffield dryly. He was silent for some minutes, folding and refolding his paper absently, frowning a little. "And are you satisfied with that arrangement?" he asked presently.

"Perfectly. I shouldn't wish to live in my wife's pocket, so why should I expect her to live in mine? I appreciate my own freedom too highly to grudge any woman hers. Besides, you know, I'm not the material that good, domesticated husbands are fashioned out of."

"Yes, but the time for considering that sort of thing is usually before the ceremony," said the other man, still dissatisfied. "Gad! I should like to see my wife's face if I suggested the mutual liberty idea to her!"

The train drew up at the next station. It was Cecilia's stopping-place; she had to change here for the District Railway. But to leave the carriage it would be necessary for her to pass by the two men. For a moment she was tempted to let herself be carried

on. Yet if Duffield left the train the next time it stopped and she and her husband were alone together, and it occurred to him to make some remark to her! No, she could not risk it. He was less likely to notice her at this moment, while he was still engaged in conversation with his friend.

"My wife—" he was saying, and broke off to open the carriage door for Cecilia.

She felt her features stiffening into rigidity. All her acquired ease and self-possession seemed slipping from her. She thought she must be turning into the very semblance of the awkward, unhappy girl to whom he had made his proposal, and if he looked at her he could not fail to recognize her. But he did not look at her. She kept her face as far as possible averted, and this and her disturbance of mind made her uncertain of her steps. She stumbled a little as she alighted, and he caught her arm to steady her; but he did it abstractedly, still intent, it seemed, on what he was going to say to his companion, and, only glancing to see that she reached the platform in safety, turned back and dismissed her from his mind.

Cecilia went on her way, dazed and unconscious of her surroundings, till she heard a shout behind her and saw people looking at her with amusement, when she found that she was being pursued by a collector, having forgotten to give up her ticket. She pulled herself sternly together. It was absurd to be upset by such a trifling incident. It would have been embarrassing, of course, if St. George had recognized her, but since he had not, what was there to be agitated about?

On reaching the flat, she found a note from Sallie saying that she was dining with the Harold Wests and going on with them to a play. It had been understood

that Cecilia would probably be spending the evening at her brother's. The charlady, who was just on the point of departure, protested, aggrieved, that such had been her idea, and there was nothing to call a dinner in the place. Cecilia, with weak good-nature, suffered the woman to go. She would "roke up," as Sallie said, some food that couldn't be called a dinner for herself from somewhere or other.

It was sunny still in the street below, but the little dining-room looked dark and lonely. She dined frugally off the skeleton of a chicken and a forlorn-looking ham-bone, and as soon as possible sought the brighter drawing-room.

Here in the window-seat she sat and watched the sun setting over the view she loved. The last hours of dying daylight, tenderly sad over country meadows and green hills, too often wear a dusty, sordid melancholy among London streets. But here the open space and wide expanse of sky lifted the mind above depression. There was always life and movement somewhere. A train went rushing past, or a flag fluttered from a tower, or a church bell rang. The river at this hour was lost in shadow, but the western sky was a sea of golden light with magic cloud-shapes, rocky promontories, and glowing caves and mystic islets among which floated a fairy fleet of rose-tipped sails; and above that, primrose and saffron tints merged into green and blue in all the tenderest, most elusive shades that ever mocked an artist's palette.

Cecilia watched till the last soft sunset colour faded and darkness gathered over roof and spire. She could not disguise from herself that she felt melancholy, though she could lay her finger upon no point of soreness.

She had been perhaps a quarter of an hour in her husband's company, and he had not recognized her. Well, here was the nightmare of the last few weeks dispelled—she had nothing to fear, it seemed, from any casual meeting. He had spoken of her without bitterness and regret; he still, it appeared, thought of matrimony as a bond to be evaded—there was a load lifted from her troubled conscience. How often had she feared that her very name, and the thought of what she was to him, must be hateful to his mind.

And still that obscure tang of bitterness worked through all her thoughts.

A song that Emmeline used to sing—a sentimental, old-fashioned, Early Victorian song, that must have been sung first of all by Emmeline's mother—came to her mind, and in spite of its absurdity applied to her own case, would not be driven out.

> "After travel in far lands,
> After touch of wedded hands,
> . . . . . .
> Why thus joined—why ever met,
> If we must be strangers yet?"

It was quite ridiculous—it was even, she vaguely felt, not playing the game—it was almost a breach of the conditions of her marriage—that she should sit in the summer dusk, like a love-sick girl, sentimentalizing over the man to whom she was bound by nothing but an empty legal tie.

"But I am not sentimental," pleaded Cecilia to the stern tyrant self that always set such ruthless bounds to her vagrant fancies. "It isn't human not to be able to feel towards the man who is, at least, in the eyes of the law, my husband, the same as to a casual

stranger. I don't want him to feel differently towards me—at least, I don't want him to feel as a husband. I wish he were nothing of the sort. I believe we might be quite good friends if it were not for that. And I should like him for a friend; he has seen and done so much that I want to hear about."

For some minutes she speculated on the interesting friendship which might have flourished between them if they had not been linked together; then honesty compelled her to admit that but for that link there was scarcely the remotest chance that their lives would have touched at any point. And if they had? Would he have found any ground in common with that old Cecilia of the suburbs? It would have been like the fellowship of a sea-gull and a London sparrow. Everything that had changed and broadened her life she owed to her marriage. But for that she would never have known the affection and congenial companionship of her friends. They loved her now perhaps for her own sake, but she had always recognized to what she was indebted for their first interests. Both to Salome, who knew the facts of her marriage, and to Biddy, who had heard nothing, she was the heroine of a romantic story, a person environed with romantic possibilities. Turn the matter as she would, she could not escape from the sense of her obligation to St. George. And it was part of the bargain between them that she should show no gratitude, nor even, in her own stern code, feel very much. He would not, she believed, want her to think too kindly of him.

"After touch of wedded hands!" the silly little song would repeat itself. Well, no wedded hands could have touched more indifferently than theirs this afternoon. True, he had not suspected whose hands

he touched; but would his indifference have been less if he had? Somewhat, perhaps. The sight of the woman who was his wife must have roused some slight passing interest, however little he cared to know about her. She wondered who told him she was lecturing on Woman's Rights in America. She was sorry he should have that idea of her—it seemed, somehow, an unattractive rôle—she did not want him to think of her quite in that way. Yet she herself had told him she meant to take up the Suffrage, knowing very well how the typical Suffragette would figure in his eyes. How absolutely unprepossessing she had made herself that morning, and what a hopeless idea of her personality she had managed to give him. Would he think her any different if he saw her now? She must surely be somewhat changed or he would have recognized her—unless the impression she had made on him had been so slight that he had lost all recollection of it. Even now, it seemed, she could not have changed into anything remarkable, for apparently in the train she had made no impression on him at all. Sallie could not have sat in a railway carriage, even concealed behind a paper, without somehow radiating the fact that an interesting person was in the vicinity. But neither Harry nor his friend seemed to have given a thought to her. Decidedly she would give no more thoughts to him.

It had grown quite dark in the room now; lights shone in all the house-fronts; the dim forms of trains, jewelled with oblongs of brightness, swept between the shadowy roofs; a deep glow burnt in the sky above the tall buildings of some exhibition. The wideness of her outlook began to oppress Cecilia. It was so vast, this world of London—such countless roofs, so many

and such manifold lives lived under them—it almost appalled her, sitting here alone in the darkness. She felt lonely without Sallie. But she could not reckon on having Sallie with her always. Lionel would find her at last in a weak moment, or some other old childhood's friend or conquering stranger would carry her away. Intercourse with Biddy must always be restricted by the lack of sympathy between Bernard and herself and the possible incursions of her husband into their circle of acquaintance. She had no other really intimate friends—it was her nature to concentrate her interests and affections. The companionship of marriage had its advantages after all: it was something fixed, reliable, lasting. She did not pine for matrimony—she had always had a clear eye for its drawbacks. How often had she and Sallie returned from visits to their married friends *hugging* themselves that they were free! And yet there were moments when freedom palled, and there seemed something better in life—even the man in the train appeared to have found that. The least ideal union gave people some common interests, some care for one another. When John was away Emmeline fussed and fretted, when Biddy was ill Bernard swore at the doctor. There would be nobody to swear at the doctor if she were ill, she could never be sure that there would be any one to care. There were possibilities in life which she had put away from her for ever.

"Strangers yet! Strangers yet!" That tiresome song!—she could hear Emmeline singing it in her little, weak, breathy voice. It was the kind of song Emmeline would sing. For herself, she was not going to encourage such sentimental nonsense. She jumped up and turned on the electric light.

CHAPTER V

CELIA

"THIS," said St. George, "is one of life's ecstatic moments!"

He sat in the softest chair in Biddy's own sanctum, his head thrown back against the downiest of cushions; the smoke of one of Bernard's choicest cigars curled upwards between his slack fingers; Biddy's pretty, white-robed figure was before him at the piano; the strains of the *Moonlight Sonata* filled the room. The prodigal was enjoying all the time-honoured privileges of a prodigal.

Mrs. Thornton wheeled round with some abruptness at his last words.

"If you enjoy these things so much, I wonder you don't enjoy them more often."

"Why, you see, Biddy," said her brother-in-law, settling his head more comfortably against the cushions, "if I enjoyed them more often, I shouldn't enjoy them so much."

"And you lead a hard, rough, dangerous, uncivilized life for a couple of years in order that you may enjoy a few ecstatic moments at the end of it? Are they worth it?"

"Bless the child! It isn't for the sake of those moments I spend my years as I do. I like the hard, rough, uncivilized life."

"But why do you? I see no charm in it."

"You and I, Biddy, are two very different people. You wouldn't see charm in many things I enjoy—this excellent cigar, for instance, which I oughtn't to be smoking in here——"

"Oh, I don't mind it for once—with the windows open. You are a privileged person; you can smoke all over the house. Only not, I do beseech you, in bed! You see, you are next to the night nursery."

"I know I am."

"Oh, Harry—Jerry doesn't really cry and disturb you?"

"Not a bit. I mean, he doesn't disturb me. I simply think in my dreams I hear the jackals prowling round the camp, and turn over and go to sleep again."

For a moment Jerry's mother looked more resentful than reassured. Then she laughed.

"Now I know you are only making fun of me, for Jerry really scarcely ever cries. He is an angel. Now, seriously, Harry, he *is* a godson to be proud of."

"Yes, he's a fine little chap. What are you going to make of him, Biddy?"

Biddy promptly turned from the piano to consider the question, somewhat to her brother-in-law's regret, for he would have preferred hearing the end of the *Moonlight Sonata* to discussing the profession most suited to his nine-months-old nephew.

"Not an explorer, certainly," said the young mother, with rather pointed emphasis.

"You needn't worry," said her brother-in-law calmly. "Explorers are born, not made. If Jerry hasn't got the wandering spirit he won't want to be one; and if he has, and has enough of it, steel ropes won't hold him back."

Biddy sighed; with her arms on the table, her chin in her palm, she contemplated the speaker gravely. Harry thought she sighed with a maternal eye on the future. He would have been surprised and amused to know that he himself was the object of her motherly solicitude.

"But explorers can't be always exploring," she said presently. "You don't mean to wander all your life, Harry?"

"Why not?"

"You must get tired of it some day and want to settle down."

"I don't think so." He got up suddenly and began to walk about the room as if the mere suggestion of settling down made him restless. "I don't know how to explain it to you, Biddy. It isn't that I hate civilization, though I like freedom and roughing it better. If I could be certain of half a dozen lives lived on this earth in the same conditions as the present I'd be very well content with Bernard's lot for one of them; but since I can only reckon safely on this that I have, I want to get the most I can out of it, and spend it in the way that suits me best. And my way is to see all I can. I suppose you don't know what it means—the hunger for seeing what lies beyond. I remember trying to explain it to my mother when I was a little chap. I had been getting into trouble for running away from my nurse; she said, How could I be so naughty and mischievous? I can fancy myself now, with my elbows on her knees, trying to make the thing clear to her: 'Sure, mother, it wasn't mischief at all. I was just after seeing what lay round the bend of the road.' She didn't understand. Nobody does, unless they have a touch

of the same spirit themselves. I've always been after seeing what lay round 'the bend of the road' ever since, and so long as I feel there's still something for me to see, it's no use to talk of my settling down." He took a turn up the room. "It isn't as if I had anybody belonging to me to keep me at home. No," as she opened her lips to protest, "you are glad to see me when I come, and you make me welcome like a kind little sister; but you have Bernard and the boy to fill your life. I'm only an incident in it—I'm not necessary to your happiness, or to any living soul's."

As he spoke, a hasty movement struck against a small table, and a photograph in a carved wooden frame fell to the ground. He picked it up absently, and for some minutes went on talking, holding it in his hand. Biddy's rejoinders, in spite of herself, grew vague and abstracted.

"That's a good face," he said, setting the frame back in its place. "A friend of yours, Biddy?"

It was the portrait of a girl in evening dress, with a dark fur falling off one shoulder, and it was signed "Celia."

The door opened, and Bernard came into the room. He stopped short, seeing his brother bending over the photograph, and glanced quickly at his wife. Biddy's finger-tips met on his arm with a warning pinch as she moved swiftly to Harry's side.

"Who is that?" she asked innocently. "Oh, Celia. Yes, she's a friend I love very much. Do you think her pretty?"

"Good-looking, rather. I like her face. It's a relief in these days to see the portrait of a young woman who isn't demurely looking down or affectedly looking up. There is something attractive about Celia."

"She's a dear," said Biddy warmly. "She has been out of England for a long time. I should like to introduce you to her some day. But she has a husband."

"Oh, I don't want to marry her," said St. George, laughing.

Bernard made a movement forward. He met his wife's eyes, full of darting signals, with an impassive front. "There's somebody ringing you up on the telephone, Biddy," he remarked coolly.

As she withdrew reluctantly he settled himself in his brother's vacant chair and drew out an evening paper. Harry continued to stroll about the room in silence. The brothers never had much to say to one another when alone.

"I say," said the elder, pausing suddenly before the table that held the portrait, "I'm awfully sorry, old chap, I'm afraid I've been knocking chips off this frame of Biddy's. What a clumsy brute I am! Here's a leaf of the carving cracked across."

Bernard dropped his paper and looked up. Harry stood with the photograph signed "Celia" in his hand, trying to fit the broken part of a leaf in place.

"Oh, it doesn't matter in the least," he said uneasily. "I've told Biddy what a mistake it is to crowd her rooms with silly little tables and photographs that nobody wants to see. To my mind there's something barbaric in this modern idea of decorating one's house with the effigies of one's friends."

"That depends on the effigy," said St. George absently, his head still bent over the photograph. "I am sorry about the frame, though. I think I'll take it to my room and stick the leaf together."

"Oh, I shouldn't trouble," said Bernard. "It isn't of the smallest consequence."

He took up his paper with a strong feeling of indignation against his wife for the position in which she had left him. It gave him a feeling of restless disquiet to see his brother standing there with his wife's portrait in his hand. It was most annoying of Biddy, and excessively bad taste, considering all the circumstances, to have photographs of Cecilia about the room—and such absurdly flattering photographs too, a kind of trap to catch Harry's interest. Heaven only knew what her idea was. It was all very well to signal to him now not to speak—the occasion for speaking should never have arisen. He wished to goodness Harry would put the thing down. He might be only intent on mending the broken carving, but it was disturbing to have him there, and to expect any moment some question that it would be equally difficult to answer or to evade.

Bernard need not have feared, however, that his brother's attention was arrested by any haunting likeness in the portrait before him. It roused no sort of association in his mind. The details of his wife's face and appearance had been almost entirely obliterated from his memory, but a general impression of the sort of girl she was remained vividly clear. There was nothing in the charmingly artistic picture before him to link his thoughts for a moment to that plain, unattractive young woman. No more resemblance was there between the pretty distinctive writing of "Celia" and that of Cecilia Ursula Ward. As with most impressionable people, Cecilia's script varied greatly with mood and circumstance, and her signature on her wedding-day had, with nervousness,

cold, and unsympathetic pen, been an illegible scrawl. That on the photograph woke no suspicion in St. George. He was not accustomed to think of his wife by her Christian name, and if he had been, Celia would naturally have suggested nothing to him.

He rarely thought of his wife at all. His feeling for her had never been more than the interest of a benefactor in the object of his benevolence, and had long since sunk into indifference. He did not actively regret the quixotic impulse that had bound his life to hers. He was inclined to be fatalistic in regard to his own blunders and mistakes—it was pleasanter to lay the burden of his rashness and error upon Kismet than to shoulder the responsibility for them himself—and in spite of his friends' solemn warnings he had never felt the loss of his freedom; yet a secret consciousness of the unwisdom of the step he had taken, apart from any practical consequences, made his marriage a subject on which he never much cared to speak.

When he thought of his wife at all it was with a certain uneasiness lest she should have come to repent of her blind bargain. He heard something of her doings from Biddy—not very much, for the latter practised a certain reticence in discussing the subject. He supposed that in her case, too, a fictitious interest had died down into natural indifference; it was not easy to imagine any real affinity between his gay little sister-in-law and the morbidly shy, reticent girl he had married. He understood that they corresponded occasionally, however, and gathered that his wife seemed content with her lot. She was travelling in America, Biddy said, with Miss Sarah Verity, the writer; had Harry seen any of her books?

Harry knew nothing of them, and felt no drawing towards either the books or their author. He had no great opinion of latter-day female scribes, and he instinctively disliked the sound of Sarah Verity—it suggested the *nuda veritas* of which he was inclined to think one saw too much in modern literature, especially that class of it which allows nothing to be truth which is not unpleasant. Unconsciously to himself, the idea of his wife lost even the shadowy interest it had possessed from this association.

He supposed Miss Verity was a supporter of Suffrage. Cecilia had not miscalculated his attitude towards that movement. He had an old-fashioned chivalry where the sex was concerned and all the old-fashioned prejudices. The idea of woman leaping into the arena to fight her own battles was repugnant to him. He would have much preferred his wife to keep out of it. He could not imagine her very militant, or raising her voice in public, but it was impossible to say what the influence of Miss Sarah Verity might not have accomplished; she was, he thought, the sort of girl to form an ardent attachment to a stronger spirit of her own sex. He saw her following the latter from one American platform to another, zealously taking notes, immersed in correspondence, with not a thought to spare from Suffragette propaganda, public meetings, and women's congresses. In this, it will be seen, he was grossly unjust to Cecilia, whose wanderings in America had been entirely unconnected with any endeavour to raise or ameliorate the condition of her fellow-women, and whose associations with her own sex had taken the form of nothing more earnest than pink luncheons and violet teas.

At last, to Bernard's infinite relief, St.George restored the photograph to its place.

"There, Celia! I've done the best I can for you. I didn't mean to harm you." He put his hands in his pockets and turned away. "What did Biddy say her name was?"

"Her name?" Bernard looked up from his paper with an air of abstraction. He was horribly uncomfortable, but his well-cut, impassive features did not betray him. His gaze wandered back to the paper, and in that moment of desperation he had the good fortune, as he unconsciously phrased it to himself, to catch sight of a notice of the death of an old school-friend of his brother's. He called the latter's attention to it.

"Molyneux, eh? It's years since I heard anything of him." He took the paper from his brother's hand and read the notice through several times. "D'you remember how I stayed at his place once in the holidays, and had the good fortune to fish his young brother Dicky out of a mill-race? Molly and I had been giving the family lively times, and his mother was for calling down the curse of Cromwell on me, and after that, dear soul, she'd have put her eyes on two sticks to please me! Poor old Molly! to think he ended up a schoolmaster! And Dicky, whom we thought the quiet, stay-at-home boy, I hear, went with MacNaughten's expedition to the South Pole last year!"

His attention was completely diverted. But Bernard, in spite of his relief, was not easy in his mind. He disliked the evasion he had practised. It made him feel like a scheming, plotting, transpontine villain. That he should refuse to lend any aid to Biddy's

rash endeavour to bring together an indifferent and particularly unsuited couple was only natural, but to use guile and stratagem to prevent a husband discovering his wife's identity was another matter. It was a most objectionable position into which Biddy had forced him. He was excessively annoyed at the whole affair.

Consequently, later in the evening, when Biddy attempted apologies for her pinch, he received them with coldness.

"If the photograph hadn't been there," he said, not raising his eyes from his book, "there would have been no necessity to prevent me saying anything. I have told you before, Biddy——"

"I know you have!" hastily. "It's a point we don't agree on. One of the very few!"

"I don't understand your idea in the matter. Why have the photograph there at all if you don't mean Harry to know it's his wife?"

"I didn't mean it to be there. I'd forgotten it was."

"Of course, it isn't in the least like Cecilia."

"I think it is—at her best."

"Then I've never seen her at her best."

"Very likely not, dear, but I have, and I mean that Harry shall. But I don't want to raise his expectations too high. People don't always look their best when you want them to. It's far safer to let him think of Cecily as she was when he married her, and be impressed with the difference."

"You build too much on that difference. Certainly Cecilia is immensely improved from what she was, but I shouldn't call her particularly good-looking even now. I shouldn't fall in love with her if she were the last woman on earth."

"Probably not; but your taste and Harry's may not be identical."

"Seriously, the sooner you get that family novelist idea of those two falling in love with each other out of your head the better. It isn't in the least likely to happen. People never fall in love where it is particularly fitting or desirable that they should. And Harry's not at all a likely subject for romance; neither is Cecilia the woman to inspire it. I only speak for your good to save you from future disappointment," said Bernard, quite believing what he said.

Biddy was silent a moment.

"Well, I didn't choose Cecily as the one woman in the world for Harry; at least that responsibility isn't mine. He chose her himself. Oh, I know he didn't do it for love, but whatever he did it for, she is his wife. If he wants to settle down now, he must settle down with her or no one."

"But he doesn't want to. He is in love with liberty."

"Men tire of liberty in time as they do of the other objects of their affection. Wanderers and vagabonds have been tethered to their own hearthstones before now, and the most unlikely people have fallen in love. You did it yourself once, and after that miracle every other case must seem ordinary."

"Biddy," said her husband, taking up his novel, "don't be a silly child. That sort of cheap cynicism sounds like your friend Miss Verrinder, and you know I can't stand that girl. We shall never agree in our ideas about Harry's marriage, so I think we had better drop the subject."

CHAPTER VI

THE CONSPIRATORS

IT was a sultry day in June. In the drawing-room of Sallie's flat the blinds were drawn, obscuring the glare of sunshine outside, but through the open window the hot air of the street was still perceptible, made hotter, it seemed, by the endless rush and roll of traffic. In the cool and tempered gloom within, Salome's white frock, soft, pale, golden hair, and glancing hazel eyes made touches of brightness; but even Sallie's cheeks were paler than usual with the heat, and her eyes for once were dreamy rather than keen. On every table and stand bowls of Devonshire roses made the air heavy with their fragrance, and it may have been the gentle reminder of their presence that accounted for her unwontedly grave and thoughtful humour.

Biddy, coming in out of the hot, dusty street, paused to exclaim with delight:

"Roses, roses! Masses of them! You extravagant person! What does this mean? You are either reducing yourself to bankruptcy or some poor wretch of a man to distraction."

"Not at all," said Sallie calmly, relieving her of her sunshade. "These are Chardleigh roses. Lionel had them sent up. I believe he means to show me

what I am missing by staying in town in this stifling weather. You know I've promised to go down to Elizabeth's with Cecil in a week or two, and he thinks I have been doing too much lately, and wants to hurry me off immediately."

"Oh," said Biddy, dropping into a chair with a thoughtful little frown, "that would be rather an interruption to our plans, wouldn't it? Are you going?"

"Because Lionel wants me to? Certainly not."

Young Mrs. Thornton began slowly to remove her gloves. "I don't see what you want with the country," she said, looking about her at the cool and dainty freshness of the shaded room. "It's so blissfully peaceful here, Salome. I never come to see you and Cecily without feeling it, or go away without envying you."

"I don't know why you should do that," rejoined her friend, making the tea. "Do you suppose that we have no worries? You needn't think you have a monopoly of the cares of life because you are married."

"No, but what much more interesting worries yours are than mine." She bent over a bowl of roses on the table beside her and took a long breath of their sweetness. "It's so much more exciting considering whether you'll marry a man or not than considering what you'll give his friends for dinner after you have married him."

"I thought," observed Sallie, studiously disregarding any hidden relevance in this general statement, "you had come to talk to me to-day about somebody who was already married."

"Oh, yes! So I have." Biddy turned from the

roses with a sudden look of gravity and purpose on her bright little face. "I thought it would be an excellent opportunity this afternoon, while Cecily is doing the Academy with her sister-in-law, to come here and discuss things with you. It is disgraceful, considering the length of time Harry has been in England, that we haven't contrived a meeting between these two yet. But you see, Sallie, it's not such a simple matter as you might suppose."

"I never supposed it would be simple."

"Even when you've got them into each other's company under natural and unembarrassing circumstances—and that's a harder thing to do than anybody who hasn't tried it could imagine—the difficulties and risks are only beginning. Suppose they didn't fall in love after all—or suppose one did and the other didn't. If Cecily got to care for Harry——"

"Why not the other way round?" suggested Sallie, staring thoughtfully at the roses on the table. "It occasionally happens so."

"Well, that wouldn't be so tragic as the other. There's always more chance of a man hopelessly in love getting over it. But I can't somehow *imagine* Harry. Bernard says——"

"I thought you weren't going to trouble about anything Bernard said?"

"No, I wasn't. But it isn't easy to ignore people completely when you are married to them. I can't help being conscious of him there in the background, always ready to raise objections and pour cold water, and say, 'I told you so,' if I fail. If I hadn't been married, I should have managed the whole thing long ago; but a husband does spoil one's nerve. Yet,

however great the risks of failure are, I think, as Cecily's friends, we ought to take them, Sallie. It's a miserable life for her at present."

"Why miserable? She has money enough to live on; she has freedom and friends; she has a blissfully peaceful home, and she never has to bother to think about her husband's dinner. What more can a woman want?"

Biddy flashed a swift glance at her friend, who was gazing unconsciously out of the window.

"Oh, well," she said, playing with her wedding-ring, "I suppose there is something in marriage after all. It isn't a fairy tale, as they tell you in books; but it has its advantages. I suppose one ought not to expect it to be romantic, too. I do feel sometimes as if I should like to stick pins into Bernard to stir him up a little, but I suppose that is my unreasonableness. I am sure he would be astonished to be told he wasn't a model husband. He really means to be kind, and, though he would die rather than tell me so, I believe he is rather fond of me. He is perfectly lost and miserable when I am away, and of course I should hate it if anything happened to him. And then there is always little Jerome."

"And that's marriage!" said Salome, sitting up and staring straight before her. "That's what all the lovers' vows end in, what all the stories lead up to! And you cry over the end of a book, Biddy, if the lovers part instead of falling into one another's arms, and you are lying awake at night now thinking how you can unite Cecil and her husband and marry me to Lionel West! Why trouble, if that is all it amounts to?"

"But it isn't—it's no use talking, Sallie; you

couldn't understand unless you were married yourself. It's being so used to some one and having them so much a part of your life that you can't be happy without them, even if you quarrel with them when they are there."

"Well, I hope I shall never be so used to anybody as that, and I can't quite see the advantage to Cecil being made to feel lost and miserable when her husband is away, seeing that she has a husband who is never happy unless he is away. I'm sorry, Biddy, but the risks of this marriage are too great for me to care to help things on in any way. You will think me a coward, I know, but I should feel myself something worse if through my interference Cecil's peace of mind was destroyed."

Biddy's face fell. For a moment she sat silent, a little checked and disconcerted. Then her expression cleared once more.

"I'll risk it," she said, with determination; "and if you won't help, Salome, you'll promise me at least to do nothing to hinder. After all, I haven't been so much to blame as yet, for Harry has been away for weeks, and there was nothing I could do. He has been visiting the mother of his old schoolfellow, Molyneux, who died recently, and attending to some troublesome law business for her, as her other son is abroad. So like Harry; he is always ready to take any amount of trouble over other people's affairs, and never gives half the attention he ought to his own! But he is coming back to us soon, and I have a plan already arranged for him when he comes. Listen, Sallie, while I tell you all about it, and don't try to throw cold water. It's quite a good one."

. . . . . .

Cecilia came home in a tired and languid mood. She had not enjoyed the Academy. She never, in these days, enjoyed any public assembly. The haunting fear of an encounter with her husband had grown almost to an obsession, and assailed her even in what her reason told her were the most unlikely places for meeting him. In every crowd chance resemblances disturbed her. Voices speaking suddenly behind her made her start, and her eyes had formed a habit of ceaseless watching which, much as it wearied her, no effort of her will could break.

She returned home with an "Academy headache" which she had not honestly earned, for the attention she had given to the pictures on the walls had been of the most cursory description, and found there a note scribbled by Biddy, asking her to go to the theatre with her on the day but one following. Her sister-in-law hoped that Cecily had not engaged herself to other people as deeply as Sallie had done, and not left herself a day to spare before she left town.

"It seems rather hot for theatres," said Cecilia listlessly, putting the note back in its envelope; "and can't you really come, Sallie, or is that an excuse because you are quarrelling with Bernard?"

"It doesn't follow that it won't be bitterly cold the day after to-morrow because to-day has been moderately warm," said Sallie, who always spoke rather contemptuously of any English attempt at hot weather; "and I really am engaged for the whole of the week with Helen. Bernard sent his love to me this afternoon, or Biddy said he did, so I suppose we are at peace. But that wouldn't have mattered on Friday, because he won't be there. Biddy told me to

tell you he and his brother are dining together somewhere that evening."

Cecilia was glad to have this definite news of her husband's absence; she had supposed he was out of town, but she never had more than a vague idea of his whereabouts, for her avoidance of his name was so pointed that Biddy rarely had courage to impart any scrap of information concerning him.

If her nature had been more suspicious, she might have wondered at the care with which Salome superintended her toilette for the theatre, sternly condemning her to do up her hair a second time when the first attempt fell short of perfection, and insisting on the choicest gown in her wardrobe, though Cecilia protested that the occasion called for no special magnificence, and it was really a pity to waste her prettiest evening frock on the Futility Theatre.

Sallie stood firm, and when Cecilia found herself in a taxi *en route* for Biddy's she did not regret her friend's determination. The last glimpse at her mirror had been gratifying. The cheerful chatter that had enlivened her dressing and Sallie's had brightened her mood, the prettiest evening frock was really pretty and suited her charmingly, her cheeks had a flush and her eyes a sparkle; she was prepared to throw herself whole-heartedly into the frivolity of the evening, and her spirits danced already with the anticipation of enjoyment. She was glad to be going out again with dear little Biddy; it was so long since they had had a really satisfactory time together. And below all her pleasure, hidden and unconfessed in the back chambers of her brain, was a little stir of excitement at the thought of being in the house that was, as much as any place in England, Harry St.

George's home. She had the most perfect confidence in his absence, but he had been there recently, and would be there again, and his presence gave his brother's house a curious, disturbing interest.

Perhaps it was this undercurrent of excitement in her own mood which prevented her noticing a touch of nervousness in Biddy's.

The latter greeted her warmly and commented with enthusiasm on her appearance.

"I shall be proud to be seen with you. I was afraid if you disappointed me at the last I should have to fall back on Mrs. McKay from next door. She's a dear soul, but she does make such a distressing object of herself when she goes out in the evening, I'm afraid Mark would scarcely have appreciated her company. Did I tell you my cousin Mark had a box for the play? He wasn't able to dine here, but he will meet us at the Futility."

Cecilia's anticipations of an evening's enjoyment gathered assurance. She had met Major Jerome several times, and they always entertained one another admirably. She had first distinguished herself in his eyes by her intimate knowledge concerning a small, half-forgotten punitive expedition in which he had been wounded, and ever since, when in company together, he had singled her out for attention. Cecilia was conscious, with some amusement, that in his mind she was quite a brilliant conversationalist. Most people succeed in making this impression on at least one member of their acquaintance, though it is usually not the member they would have chosen to impress. She was often ungrateful enough to wish that she could have shone, as she was conscious of shining in his society, in that of some people who

she hated talking into space to some person unknown, she disliked the sound of her own voice in an empty room. She wished Biddy or one of the servants would come to relieve her of the unpleasant duty; but Biddy still lingered. She supposed there was no help for it.

"Yes! Yes!" She answered to a whirring noise. Then a voice suddenly sounded clearly in her ear. "Is that you, Biddy?"

The receiver shook in Cecilia's fingers. It was St. George who was speaking.

Her first wild, unreasoning impulse was to hang up the receiver and fly, but a moment brought her to her senses.

"Is Mrs. Thornton there?" asked the voice.

She plucked up courage and spoke.

"Mrs. Thornton is in the house. Do you want to speak to her?" Then, growing bolder with the sound of her own voice, "It is Mr. St. George, isn't it?"

"Ah, is that you, Parsons?" was the response. "Yes, I want you to give a message to your mistress. Will you ask her to be good enough to bring to the theatre——"

The receiver wavered suddenly. Cecilia lost the rest of the sentence. It was with a great effort she put her lips to the opening and spoke once more.

"I beg your pardon, I didn't quite hear. What theatre did you say?"

"The Futility. But Mrs. Thornton knows. I was to meet her there. I want you to ask her to bring——"

The door opened, and Parsons, the parlour-maid, appeared. She was a tall, slim girl, with a pretty, soft, refined voice.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. I didn't know any one was here. I thought I heard the telephone."

"Yes, I wish you would come and answer it, Parsons. I—I can't hear very well. I think somebody wants to give a message."

She left the receiver in the maid's more capable hands and hurried out of the room. She was sure when Parsons became aware who was at the other end of the wire her own reluctance to answer to the message would be more than adequately explained.

Biddy was still upstairs. Apparently she had not crept with a sufficiently mouse-like tread to her little son's bedside, for the child's voice was uplifted in a wail of protest.

Cecilia found herself confronting her own startled reflection at the glass in the hall. There was a flush of colour in her face, and her eyes were bright. She was hurt and angry. This was what had lain behind Biddy's innocent-seeming suggestion of an old-time pleasuring together and Sallie's eagerness about her dress and hair! They were in a conspiracy together. They would have led her, unsuspecting, into an embarrassing and humiliating situation. She had trusted to their assurances and had been deceived—trapped!

But almost at once the anger faded. After all they meant her nothing but kindness. They neither of them understood. Biddy knew nothing; she probably imagined that the separation of her marriage lay in some quarrel or misunderstanding that a meeting might set right. Sallie had heard the facts; but Sallie was so different! How could she know what it meant to be the wife of a man who cared absolutely nothing for you, who asked nothing of you, wanted

nothing—who never wished to see your face or hear anything of your life? How could she realize what it meant to thrust yourself unsought into the life of a man who felt for you like that?

Suddenly, as she flung the question at her own reflection, she saw a curious look of doubt leap up in the eyes of the girl in the glass. *Did* St. George really feel like that? No, that was not the way to put it. Would he feel like that if he saw her as she was now?

Personal vanity had as small a part in Cecilia's moral equipment as it could have in that of any woman with a grain of feminity in her; but she was not blind. She could not pretend that the image in the glass before her was one that any man, believing himself married to a woman wholly without charm, recognizing as his wife would have looked at with indifference.

She saw a tall, slender figure, in filmy, clinging folds of silk, with here and there a gleam of silver embroidery; a small head carried on a slim white throat; a sweet, flushed face which some strong inward feeling had kindled and stirred to something more nearly approaching beauty than she had ever seen in it before. Heavy, chestnut-brown hair made a soft shadow above her forehead; beneath dark, level brows looked out eyes of woodland grey, not Sallie's clear, brilliant hazel, but the soft, cloudy mingling of grey and green and brown which is seen down forest vistas, or in the deep waters of some dim, shadowed pool. There was almost the startled appeal of a shy, woodland creature in the gaze that they lifted now, though Cecilia did not know it. Here was no sensuous, siren loveliness, universal in its challenge and destructive in its working, but a face

that some man might love, and love dearly. It was something very different from that stiff, dull, colourless girl with whom Harry St. George had proposed to go through a form of marriage because he was so sure that no man would ever love her or desire her as his wife in reality.

Ah, that was the thought that pricked her, the sting of which she had always felt beneath all the glow of her gratitude! Wouldn't she have been less than human if she had not wished that, just for one moment, the husband who had dismissed her from his life with kindly indifference could see her now?

And he might. It would be so easy. Nobody would know that she had received his message through the telephone. She could go, it would seem, all unsuspiciously to the theatre with Biddy and meet him there. There would be no scene—no awkwardness. He would talk to Biddy and she to Major Jerome. The temptation, half-seriously considered for a moment, suddenly sprang up, strong and overpowering. Why not? Why should she not have a brief hour of triumph? A vision of the theatre flashed before her—the bright lights and soft colour and gay music, the witchery and intoxication of sense, the subtle exhilaration that might wake in her blood, that would carry her out of herself, and make her gay, daring, brilliant. Why shouldn't he see her so for once? She felt it would be worth almost any risk to see the careless, indifferent kindness of his glance wake up to even a momentary homage. It might be a hazardous experiment, but the impulse to dare was upon her. Why should she always be bound by cramping restrictions? She was young—the face in the glass was a girl's face still—

and most of the delights of girlhood she had never known. Why shouldn't she put the cup to her lips for once and taste the joy of life—romance—or the possibility of romance?

All the denied instincts of her youth, all the repressed feminity of her being, woke up and clamoured for an hour of satisfaction. It was only for that hour she asked. She had no thought of making any real incursion into Harry St. George's life. A momentary, unsanctified desire to make him pay for his well-meant act of generosity with the pangs of misprized love she dismissed as unworthy. And yet, if by some chance — a millionth chance — she planted in his mind this evening something that might grow to love—if he offered her in all seriousness the place and rights of which only the empty shadow was now hers, if life in its fulness were given to her, and she could turn her back for ever on that haunting terror of loneliness? Her eyes, for a moment, looked far ahead. She could not close them immediately to the vision of what might be. These things came to others. The happiness of loving and being loved was every woman's birthright.

But how if a woman had sold her birthright for a mess of pottage?

The vision faded. Her eyes confronted the reality of things steadily and unflinchingly. She could not go to the theatre and meet her husband. She had made her bargain—she had taken his money and resigned, once and for all, every other claim upon him. She had no right to force herself upon his notice now. She knew his feeling. He did not want a wife, did not want the cares and burdens of a real marriage. He desired nothing but freedom to come and go as

he pleased; he did not wish to feel that any woman's happiness was dependent on him. If he saw her as one who might love and be loved, she would only put a disturbing element into his life. At present he was at ease on her account, believing her a woman to whom that side of life was closed. If he recognized in her a claim that he did not care to satisfy himself and that no one else could, she knew he would be troubled. Was it fair to trouble him only for the momentary satisfaction of her own vanity? The understanding at their marriage had been that there was to be no interference on either side. He had claimed no promise from her, he had only given his word never to molest her in any way; but he had, of course, trusted her to observe the same condition. She would not be observing it if she broke in upon his life now, stirring up doubts and questions. She must play fair. Nobody who had trusted her had ever yet been disappointed.

The light died out of her eyes, and the soft curve of her lips grew firm, but still she stood staring fixedly at herself in the glass. She could not turn away all at once from the thought of what she was giving up—youth and its promise, love and love's gifts—life might have been made so rich for her, and she was deliberately resolving to keep it poor.

Biddy's voice sounded at last on the landing above, her light tread on the stairs. As she reached the foot Cecilia met her.

"Biddy, darling, is there time to send in for Mrs. McKay to go to the play with you this evening?—I'm afraid I can't come!"

"But, Cecily!" Biddy lifted a troubled, rather guilty little face. "Why not? You aren't ill?"

"No," said Cecilia, avoiding her glance; "I am quite well; but it isn't possible for me to go to the theatre. It was good of you to ask me, Biddy—it was the kindest thought imaginable, but we will leave it there. I must go home."

"Cecily, dearest," faltered Biddy, "you can't have any real reason."

"I have," said Cecilia. She looked up suddenly and caught the other's look of bitter disappointment, and, smiling, put her arms round the small figure.

"Dear little Biddy! You mean it so kindly, but you mustn't try to make things different for me. Believe me, they are better as they are."

"Oh, but, Cecily, they're not! You don't know how much better they might be!"

"And how much worse!"

"I don't believe it. Nothing could be worse than the way you two are living now!"

"Yes, it could. Harry doesn't hate me now."

"He would never hate you! The idea! Darling, do be reasonable and come to the theatre this evening. I will tell Harry that I didn't give you the faintest suspicion that you would meet him there—I didn't, did I? I can't guess how you found out. Harry knew nothing about it. But I'm sure he would be grateful to me all his life if I brought you there. Ah, do come! You needn't speak to him if you don't want to—Mark will be there for you to talk to—but at least you will see him again, and he will see you looking so adorably sweet! Cecily—do—do—*do*—if you love me, come with me now, and give Harry a chance of making things right with you!"

Her bright little face was pale with earnestness as she caught the girl's hands beseechingly. Once more

temptation spoke to Cecilia in her pleading accents and clutched her with the grip of the eager little fingers. But she stopped her ears and hardened her heart.

"I can't, Biddy!" she said desperately. "You don't understand. Harry doesn't want any chances, and everything is as right as it ever can be. If you knew all, you would see that I couldn't possibly go with you this evening, even if I wanted to. It wouldn't be playing the game!"

She laughed, and pressed her little sister-in-law affectionately in her arms, then caught her cloak about her, and, telling Parsons to summon a cab, was out of the house before Biddy, still protesting, had left the bottom stair.

St. George could flatter himself that his instinct had been entirely right. He had a wife who would go to the end of the world rather than force herself unwanted into his life. What no instinct or premonition had told him was that it might have been for his happiness as well as hers if she had been a shade less scrupulous.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE FIRELIGHT

THE following week Cecilia went down with Salome to Devonshire. She turned her back on the dust and distractions of London, and, on the high, breezy cliffs and in the deep, leafy lanes, breathed in every sense more freely. Here there was nothing to disturb her holiday enjoyment. She visited all her friend's old homes and haunts; saw the trees she had climbed and the fields where she had played cricket, the woods where she had picnicked, and the cove where she had bathed. There were children and young people still climbing the trees and playing cricket in the fields; there were picnics still in the woods, and boating and bathing from the cove, and Sallie and Cecilia shared in these delights with a host of parents, aunts, cousins, and "in-laws" of all ages and degrees.

The summer this year was such a summer as had not been seen in England for many years. It lingered till the end of September, and departed royally in a blaze of gold and glory. The autumn that followed appeared to think itself an anti-climax and made no effort to sustain the splendid record of the seasons. The sun seemed to have been eliminated from the solar system; wild winds swept over the bare fields, and the last brown leaves dropped sadly into the soaked earth

under a rain that never ceased. Cecilia and Salome had prolonged their visit far beyond the original limit as week after week proved too short to hold all the gay summer doings made possible by the rare fine weather. But with the setting in of an early winter, Salome's thoughts turned lovingly to town, and, the flat being again at her disposal, she fled from the leaden, weeping skies and sullen, sobbing winds, and ensconced herself with her friend once more in their eyrie, where glistening wet chimney-pots made a more cheering spectacle than sodden trees, and the toot and whirr of motors sounded more blithely in her ears than the wail of winds or the monotonous plunging of the breakers on a rain-swept shore.

Cecilia's feelings in returning to town were more complicated, but on the whole a vague, indefinable restlessness of spirit made her glad to accompany her friend. She agreed with Salome that it would be nice to see "the child" again. Biddy had spent the summer at a farmhouse in Norfolk with her little Jerome, who had developed measles the day after the unsuccessful visit to the theatre. She had corresponded freely with her friends, but her baby's ailments had driven such trivialities as love and matrimony from her mind, and her letters had contained slight reference to St. George. Cecilia only knew that he had been with his brother in Norway, had stayed on there after Bernard returned to fetch his wife and child home, and had finally gone on to Scotland, where presumably, he still remained.

Her first definite news of him came not from Biddy, but from an outside and unexpected source.

She was at the Army and Navy Stores on a housewifely mission one afternoon, when she heard a man

at the counter beside her mention her husband's name to the woman with him.

"I found a letter from St. George at the club this morning," he said. "He is still in Scotland, but is coming up to town this week. He is very full of this Antarctic expedition of Molyneux's."

Cecilia glanced round quickly, arrested not only by the name but by something familiar in the speaker's voice. In a moment she had recognized him. It was Duffield, the war correspondent who had talked with Harry in the train.

He did not recognize her. He was not looking at her, and the involuntary interest that flashed into her face was lost on him. The woman with him, obviously his wife, was absorbed in the purchase of a wedding present, and took no interest in his communication at all.

"It seems he spent part of the summer in Norway, and whether his wanderings into the Arctic circle brought him under the Polar spell or whether he met Molyneux there I don't know, but he seems tremendously keen on the expedition."

His words fell on deaf ears so far as his wife was concerned; she had turned to the counter and was critically weighing the rival merits of a cake-knife and a crumb-scoop; he was quite unaware of the mark his random shafts of information were finding in an unnoticed auditor who stood with her back towards him, examining a sugar-bowl with housewifely thoroughness; but he went on with his discourse, quite regardless of the amount of attention he was receiving.

"You see, Molyneux is an old friend, and he would have been glad enough to have St. George, who is a

seasoned traveller. Only, as it happened, his party was complete. But now they've just heard that Winterbourne has broken his knee-cap and will have to lie up for months. It's a most fortunate thing—for St. George, for Winterbourne is the one man whose place he will be able to take. I expect he will be leaving England shortly."

"Well," said his wife, as the attendant made out the bill, "I suppose there is a fascination in Arctic exploration, but I could never see it, and I am very thankful that you don't, Arthur. It must be dreadful for the men's wives. But Mr. St. George isn't married, is he? Or wasn't there something peculiar about his marriage? I remember you told me——"

"My dear," said her husband, pocketing his change, "I have told you all sorts of things about St. George, and the one thing I shouldn't have told you seems to be the one thing you remember. Yes, he is married, but I don't think his marriage was the kind of one that calls out cake-knives and crumb-scoops from one's friends, and I don't expect it will make much difference to his wife whether he is in England or at the Pole. Are you ready? If they have the address, we may as well go."

Cecilia turned her attention with some difficulty to the purchase of a sugar-bowl. It was, perhaps, luck rather than good management which brought the business to a swift and satisfactory conclusion. She had contemplated the possibility of spending hours going from shop to shop trying to find a match for a basin belonging to the flat. Her sudden, unexpected success left her with all the rest of the afternoon at her disposal and nothing particular to do with it. It was a dark and dismal day of drizzling rain; there

was no temptation to extend her walk and study shop-windows. The feminine passion for shop-windows only came in an occasional mood to Cecilia, and this afternoon was entirely wanting. Yet she had no great desire to go straight home. Sallie was out, and the flat seemed lonely and uninviting. How would it be to go and see Biddy? There was evidently not the slightest danger of meeting her husband at the house. He would not have troubled to write from Scotland if he were coming up to London the following day. Since the summer she had only met Biddy in company with other visitors, and it was ages since she had seen her godson, little Jerome. She allowed a taxi to be called, and was whirled through the muddy brown streets and murky air in the direction of Kensington.

Biddy, she found on reaching the house, was out, but might be home any minute. Parsons was deferentially eager in her entreaties that Mrs. St. George would come in and have some tea. Cecilia always had an idea that she was an object of interest and curious speculation to Biddy's household staff. To-day her inclination jumped with the maid's suggestion. She looked down the dreary, miry street, where the drizzling rain was blotting out all perspective, and thought of the cold and comfortless journey back to the flat. An immediate prospect of firelight and teacups was too tempting to be declined.

The moment of Mrs. Thornton's return, however, was long in coming. Having drunk her solitary tea, Cecilia went up alone to the nursery.

Little Jerome pattered forward to meet her. He had roused the rapturous admiration of his mother and even stirred some paternal pride in his calm young

father, by learning to walk when he was barely a year old, and was himself not a little elated at his accomplishment. He had his teddy bear clasped in his arms, which he solemnly presented to the visitor to be kissed—in one particular spot most carefully pointed out—before he would permit himself to be embraced. He was a charmingly pretty child, delicately light in build, with hair of ringed gold, and great serious, dark grey eyes, with heavy, upward-sweeping lashes. Cecilia lifted him in her arms and, carrying him to the low rocking-chair by the fire, settled herself down to the uninterrupted enjoyment of his charms.

The superior institute nurse, sensible and self-possessed, crammed with all the latest theories of infant management and the training of the young idea, whose presence too often had a repressive and intimidating effect at her interviews with her godson, was away, and Mrs. Thornton's former maid, Truman, was in charge of the nursery. Truman's deafness, increasing with the years, made her the least embarrassing of audiences. As unconstrained as if they had been alone, Cecilia could talk soft foolish baby-talk and repeat the nursery rhymes and jingles beloved of baby minds—the little pigs that went to market, and the hare that sat just there—and was absurdly elated when Jerry, listening gravely, murmured "adain" when she finished, and ventured sweet, spontaneous kisses, and stroked her cheek with little soft dimpled fingers. She tried to coax him into repeating her name, Cecily, and thought the abbreviated "Tiss," which was all his baby lips could accomplish, the most charming of the various forms of it. She let him play with her watch-chain and furs, till, worn out with an exciting game with her "pussies," he flung

himself back in her arms in one of those moments of abandon which all mothers love, but which the quicksilver energies of childhood so rarely vouchsafe.

With the little soft, warm baby form nestled in her arms, his head against her shoulder, her cheek resting on the golden curls, Cecilia rocked gently before the fire, scarcely daring to breathe for fear of breaking the spell that held the child, so absorbed that she might have remained unconscious of approaching sounds if Truman, whose deafness made her restless and suspicious, had not risen and opened the door. Then her startled ear caught a murmur of voices on the stairs, Biddy's clear gay tones, and a man's deep voice answering them—a voice she knew only too well—which she had heard but a few times in her life, and never without dread and dismay.

It was dread and dismay unalloyed that she felt at this moment. To meet her husband here and now, with no distraction of outward circumstance, no inward fire of excitement stirring her to adventure, was a prospect of sheer terror. She looked about wildly for some way of escape. The only hope was that St. George was going to his own room, and she prayed that it might be so. If he passed his door and came on to the nursery with Biddy there was no possibility of avoiding a meeting. Yes, there was one. The night nursery door stood ajar. To slip in there, and after a few minutes make her way quickly along the passage and down the stairs was a thing that might be managed. She lifted little Jerome to the floor and sprang to her feet. Truman stood by the table, a glint of understanding in her eye. Whatever she knew or surmised of Mrs. St. George's relations with her husband she kept locked away under

her tight serge bodice with every other family secret, but her views of men in general, and husbands in particular, being pessimistic, her suspicions were probably neither kind nor just to Harry. Her sympathies at this moment were entirely with the wife who shrank from an encounter with him. Her glance promised silence.

Cecilia stole noiselessly through the door, pushing it gently to behind her, as Biddy and her brother-in-law entered the nursery. Under cover of their laughing and talking she crossed the room and turned the handle of the door leading into the passage, and found it locked on the outside.

For a moment she stood incredulous, with the handle in her hand. It seemed unthinkable that Fate could intend to treat her so cruelly. To imprison her here! —where Biddy might come any moment and betray her by a hasty exclamation, where some hideous chance might even send Harry himself!—to be caught lurking and listening—it was worse, a million times worse, than if she let them find her sitting by the nursery fire, when, with a few words of greeting, she could have slipped away, probably before her husband had had time to recognize her! But it was too late now to retrieve her steps. Surely Truman would remember that the door was locked! She heard the maid's heavy tread along the passage, and tapped on the panel as loudly as she dared. But the sound missed the woman's dulled hearing. The footsteps died away and Cecilia's hope of release died with them.

It was too late to make her appearance in the other room now—they were talking together. Already she would seem an eavesdropper. The only thing to do was to remain in hiding. She looked desperately

about for some hole or corner for concealment if detection actually threatened, but the hygienic bareness of a modern child's sleeping-room offered few hiding-places. There was a curtain on a rod suspended half-way across the room, apparently to screen Jerry's cot, but it was not drawn. She could see but dimly in the dusk—the only real light in the room came through the door that she had not properly closed behind her; in the other room they seemed content with the firelight; but if Biddy came in here on any errand she would inevitably turn on the electric switch and then—! Cecilia sank on to the nurse's bed, wringing her hands in her muff. To be discovered here, in ignominious concealment! No possible meeting with her husband that lurid fancy had painted had pictured anything half so dreadful! She would be disgraced for ever! She would never get over the shame and misery of it! Dimly through her distress she perceived the absurdity of her position without feeling her distress the least lightened by the perception. It was one of the grotesque agonies of life, one of those moments where the tragic and ridiculous mingle, which most people live through at some time or other, and wonder for ever after how they did.

And all this while she had heard their voices in the other room.

Little Jerome, left planted on the hearth-rug, had stood for a moment wide-eyed and wondering over the sudden disappearance of the auntie with the pussies. When released by his mother from the close embrace and smother of kisses which were her customary greeting after every enforced absence of a few hours, he turned to his uncle as if he suspected who was responsible for her abrupt departure.

"Tiss!" he said gravely, shaking his head.

"Oh, the darling!" cried Biddy, in a rapture of admiration. "He wants you to kiss him, Harry. How perfectly sweet of him! He learned that quite by himself—I never taught him. Did you, Truman? Isn't he a *genius?*"

"But I think, like most geniuses, he says rather more than he means," observed Harry. "I don't believe he really wants to kiss me. See, he draws back every time I go near him. He must mean something else, Biddy."

"Nonsense! What else could he mean? Is it mother you want to kiss you, little son? Well, she will. Only you must give Uncle Harry one little kiss presently, my sweet, because he is going a long, long way off—right into the dark night, Jerry boy, where it is all lonely and cold and black, and there is no nice warm sun and no bright nursery fires, and——"

"Biddy, don't frighten the little chap! He looks quite scared. I believe he thinks I am going to take him with me. Do tell him I am going to leave him here in the light and set his mind at rest. Besides, you know, it's you may be harrowing his poor little feelings for nothing. It's quite possible I may not go after all."

"I hope you won't."

"Why?"

Truman had left the nursery. Cecilia, after a moment of despair upon the bed, rose softly and peeped through the crack of the door. She could see quite plainly the two by the fire, Biddy in the low rocking-chair, with her little son locked in her arms, Harry sitting on the corner of the table, looking down at her. If their position had been but a little different

she might have made an effort to reach the nursery door. A large screen stood before it, a few steps would carry her into its shadow. But she dared not risk those steps. Biddy had only to look up, Harry to turn his head! She must wait and trust for a more favourable moment. She dared not quit her post of observation or close her ears to what was being said for fear of losing that moment. But every instinct of her nature revolted from the rôle of spy and listener.

"Do you mind, Harry," said Biddy gravely, "if I talk to you like a sister?"

Cecilia shivered with apprehension, but Harry smiled.

"Not at all. I am always happy to have you talk to me any way. I am specially honoured when you talk like a sister."

She looked at him a little wistfully and dubiously.

"Would you be very angry if I asked you why you married Cecily Ward?"

Harry's smile faded, or rather, altered its character.

"If you ask Bernard," he said dryly, "he will tell you, because I was a fool."

"I don't want to ask Bernard. I'd rather hear your reason."

"Why, really, Biddy, I don't know that I can give you any different answer. I'm inclined to think I was a fool."

"You married in haste and repented at leisure?"

"Oh, I didn't say I'd repented. It hasn't made any difference. I've never wanted to marry any one else."

"It was a purely business arrangement?" said Biddy thoughtfully, looking into the fire, her little ringed fingers playing absently with her baby's curls.

"That's all."

"You weren't in love with Cecily?"

"Certainly not."

"Nor she with you?"

"Good Lord, no! The question of love never came into it."

"It seems to have been a most unusual sort of marriage. I don't understand it."

"There is no reason why you should, Biddy. It had to do with something right back in somebody else's life. It was to right a wrong I thought. But I don't know that it did. I dare say I was a presumptuous ass to meddle."

Biddy was silent for a time.

"And that is all the marriage you will ever have, Harry?"

He smiled at her grave face. "It's all the marriage I want, Biddy. I'm a roamer, you know. You couldn't make me into a respectable, homekeeping citizen like Bernard if you tried."

"I know you don't think much of Bernard's life," she said, flushing a little. "I suppose it is very commonplace compared with yours. But after all, it has some good things in it that yours hasn't."

"I know that," said St. George. "I think Bernard is a man much to be envied." He glanced down with a smile, half-amused, half-kindly, at his brother's wife—the little slender figure in the low chair, the baby nestled down in her arms. Then his look shadowed to gravity. Perhaps his words were truer than he thought. Perhaps he might have been a better and happier man if he had been content with the commonplace things that Bernard had—if for him, too, some woman had sat in the firelight, nursing

his child. For the moment Bernard's life seemed warm and full and his own empty and solitary. But to lead the commonplace life day after day, and year after year! To go into town every morning, as Bernard did, to be shut up in an office, to let yourself into your house at the same hour every night, to sit at a smoothly served table in evening clothes, to amuse oneself for the few hours between dinner and bedtime with bridge or a novel, to sleep safe and snug at night between embroidered linen sheets, with an electric switch just over your head—nothing to listen to but your watch ticking under your pillow, nothing to dread but the burglar of civilization, nothing to look forward to but another dull day of ease and good living! Never. Better the camp set up in waste and desolate places, the rough fare, roughly cooked, and eaten with an edge of hunger, the night sky with its stars overhead, and death whispering stealthily in the shadows. The firelit vision faded. The domestic life was not for such as he.

"You must sometimes long for a home of your own," said Biddy wistfully.

"Dear little Biddy, every prowling wanderer looks with envious eyes occasionally at some other man's camp-fires, and wishes they were his own. But it is a passing madness. The wild and the waste call too loudly. You can't bind a man with vagabond blood in his veins. And it is better that he should come and go unattached, and not feel that his wanderings are stretching some woman's heartstrings."

"Women are used to having their heartstrings stretched, whether men go or stay. And it is something for a wanderer to have a hearth-fire of his own

burning somewhere, and a wife to tend it, and to give him a welcome when he does come home."

"But why do you speak of these things to me? You know I shall never have a wife."

"You mean you haven't got one?"

"No. There is a woman somewhere in the world who bears my name, but she is nothing to me, or I to her. She is less to me than any woman, because I never could, under any circumstances, ask her to be more. I am bound in honour to keep myself apart from her. Even if I hankered for a hearth and roof-tree of my own she is the last person I could ask to kindle my domestic fire. I married her on the distinct understanding that she was to be perfectly free. Can I say to her now, 'Look here, I'm tired of living alone. Come and make a home for me!' You know I couldn't. It wouldn't be playing the game."

"Oh," said Biddy, with a flash of petulance, "I hate those words! And *you* only say that because you think the game isn't worth the candle. If you really wanted Cecily for your wife you wouldn't remember your promise—at least you wouldn't let her remember it for long. I'm sorry, Harry," she said, after a moment, as he made no rejoinder, only sat staring thoughtfully into the fire. "I've no right to say that."

"You've a right to say anything you please to me if you think it's true. Aren't you my little sister?"

"But I don't think it's true. Only——"

"Yes, I know. Perhaps you are not so far out. If I really thought I had married the right woman I might—without breaking any promise—try a little persuasion. As it is, I don't think it would be any

particular happiness either to Miss Ward—Cecily, is that her name? I declare I had forgotten—either to her or me, to be companions for life. She is much better free."

"Perhaps she isn't so anxious to be free as you think."

"Do you mean there's any one she wants to marry?"

"No, I don't think so—I never heard of any one. But it is possible that, not having your vagrant instincts, she might feel that she would like a home and husband of her own."

"She might have felt that if I hadn't married her, and still not have got them. Every woman doesn't." He spoke with unusual bluntness. It was necessary, if he was to enjoy untroubled peace of mind, to retain his general easy confidence that his unwise actions did no harm to any one but himself, that he should insist upon that point. "I should never have proposed to go through a form of marriage with Miss Ward if I had not been convinced that she was not at all the sort of girl who was likely to marry."

"Did you think her so unattractive?"

"Frankly, I did."

His unseen hearer winced. She had never supposed herself under any delusion as to the feeling with which her husband regarded her; but between the opinion we suspect our acquaintance to hold of us, and that opinion expressed in bald, pitiless English, there is sometimes, even to the most modest, a difference that comes with a shock. Biddy's response, too, fell with a little chill.

"But even people as unattractive as Cecily do marry occasionally." There was the faintest of

smiles on her lips, but Harry did not notice it, and no sound of it crept into her voice.

"They do, indeed. But that girl wouldn't. She was too proud to take the sort of offer she was likely to get."

"You seem to have studied her character very thoroughly."

"I didn't study it, I read it at a glance. I wouldn't have made the proposal I did if I hadn't known exactly the sort of girl she was. You know, Biddy, I rather pride myself on my instinct in these matters."

"I know you do. I wonder if you'll ever learn that it isn't so infallible as you think."

Harry regarded her curiously. "What do you mean by that? Come, now, Biddy, you made friends with my wife. What did you think of her?"

"I liked her."

"But you are not very intimate now. You don't see much of her. Where is she, by the way? Still in America?"

"I am not quite sure where she is."

"That doesn't sound like a close and unbroken friendship."

"Even if she were in England you don't suppose she would come and visit me very frequently—with a chance of meeting you here?"

"I see. Well, you will soon be able to enjoy an uninterrupted course of her society. I couldn't very well remove myself farther from a chance of meeting her than to go to the South Pole." He looked a little quizzically at his sister-in-law; he had never been able to take her friendship with his wife very seriously or to believe it anything but an artificially stimulated interest, due to some false notion of romance.

She looked up and caught the glance. "Did you mind me trying to make friends with her?"

He smiled inwardly at what he thought the unconscious betrayal of that "trying." "Not particularly. I was a little surprised at first, and perhaps rather vexed. I should have preferred no mixing of relationships; it might have led to the revelation of what I had taken great pains to avoid. I thought Miss Ward would have understood that."

"I think she did. It was your mother who forced the acquaintanceship—and I made her. Cecily didn't know how to draw back."

"I dare say not. Well, it didn't matter. As it happened, no actual harm came of it."

"No actual harm!" Warm words of protest trembled on Biddy's lips as she thought of the tender, daughterly care Cecily had given to Harry's mother, of the broken nights, the days of confinement. But she kept back the utterance of them. Her marriage had curbed her natural impulsiveness—the contact with Bernard's cooler judgment, even while she rebelled against it, insensibly affected her own. She did now sometimes think before she spoke. Harry should hear the full story of these things some day, and she would see that it lost nothing in the telling. But this was not the moment. Feeling for his wife as he did he would listen to the tale comparatively unmoved. She knew how calmly men took the services and sacrifices of plain and unprepossessing women. When he had seen Cecily, and the change in her had roused his interest, as it could not fail to do, he would judge the matter very differently. Her thoughts flew to that long-deferred meeting. The time was short for it now, and scarcely propitious. Harry's interests at

this moment were almost entirely Polar. He had scarcely a thought to spare from outfit, stores, and equipment, nor did it seem suitable to choose this time, when the wild was calling with insistence and he was straining at the shackles of civilization, to suggest any riveting of the fetters of matrimony. Yet a meeting even now might be fruitful of results. Harry must have his expedition, but he must carry with him into night and darkness the memory of his wife, not as he had been thinking of her in the years since his marriage, but as she actually was. In the vast, untrodden solitudes among which he was venturing, amidst the howling desolation of the long Polar night, when a man's thought, it seemed, must turn inevitably to the fires of home, and he must clutch at any tie that linked him to his kind, he should learn to think of her with an affection and tenderness which should turn the empty form that had joined their lives into a real and indissoluble bond.

Without any question a meeting must be arranged. Fate was adverse, and Cecily was perverse, and Harry was unreliable, but that two people so near and dear to her should live out their lives in indifference and alienation was a thing so dreadful that to Biddy's mind it could not possibly be. She sat in preoccupied silence, making plots and plans.

And in the shadow of the nursery door Cecilia stood breathlessly watching her moment for flight. She was smarting and sore. She had heard what the proverbial listener hears, and she felt she could endure no more; she must get out of the house quickly and quietly, go right away and leave no sign of her presence. Death with lingering tortures seemed at that moment preferable to a meeting with her husband; there was

scarcely any risk she would not have taken to avoid it. The flame of the fire had died down, the dusky shadows crept out of their corners; Biddy rocked softly, with her cheek resting on Jerry's curls, Harry sat on the table with his hands in his pockets looking fixedly into the fire. Now, surely, she could venture to cross the few yards between the shadow of the door where she stood and that of the screen before the other door. Her foot fell noiselessly on the threshold.

"I wish you would poke up the fire, Harry," said Biddy suddenly. "I don't like this darkness."

Cecilia drew back swiftly as he got off the table, moved the fireguard, and struck the coals with a shattering blow. The flame leaped bright on ceiling and walls, but the noise he was making concealed every other sound. Cecilia stole from her covert into the firelit room. Cautiously and slowly she moved across the floor; Harry still pounded vigorously and Biddy dreamily watched his movements. But a few feet intervened between her and the screen when he set the poker down. She quickened her steps involuntarily; her foot struck against a small tin cart on the floor and it rattled faintly. Little Jerome struggled up in his mother's arms, stared towards the screen, and looked up in Biddy's face.

"Tiss!" he said, very slowly and distinctly.

Cecilia thought they must hear the beating of her pulses. But again Biddy misunderstood.

"Kiss you, my Jerry boy!" she said, and wrapped him in a close embrace, while Cecilia slipped softly behind the shadow of the screen. Jerry boy made one last effort to make things clear to the limited intelligence of his elders. This time he addressed his uncle.

"Pus—sies!" he said deliberately.

Harry caught up the teddy bear. "Is this what he means, Biddy?"

She nodded. "I expect so. He loves it like his own soul. But I never heard him call it pussy before. He usually speaks of it as Ba-ba." She gave a little shiver and looked towards the screen. "You shut the door, didn't you, Harry?"

"I thought so." He walked across the room, and finding the door slightly ajar, looked out. The passage was but faintly illuminated. He thought for a moment he saw something move in the dim recess of a doorway; then he laughed at his habitual suspicion of creeping shadows, so unnecessary here in Bernard's secure, police-watched dwelling, closed the door, and went back to Biddy at the fire.

An hour or two after Cecilia reached the flat she received a note from Biddy by messenger-boy.

"DEAREST CECILY,—I have just heard from Parsons that you were here this afternoon. I'm so sorry I missed you, it's such centuries since we had a real good *klatsch* together. Couldn't you come round for an hour or two this evening? Bernard won't be home till late.—Yours, with love, BIDDY.

"P.S.—Bring some music if you come, and please wear that cream ninon slip, that Truey may take a pattern of the trimming, as you promised."

"Biddy's wiles," said Cecilia, with a little smile to herself, "are almost as transparent as the ninon slip. How many times has she told me that she likes me better in that than in any blouse I have? To ask me to put it on this evening is almost the same thing as telling me that her brother-in-law will be there to be

charmed with it. It is sweet of her to trouble, but I wish she wouldn't."

Still smiling faintly, she sat down and wrote a brief reply.

"DEAR LITTLE BIDDY,—I had been shopping this afternoon, and my head aches outrageously, so please forgive me if I don't turn up this evening. Can't you come in here to-morrow for the *klatsch?*—Yours ever, CECILY.

"P.S.—I am sending the blouse by messenger, so that Truman can take the pattern at once."

"There," she said, as she sealed the envelope, "I think that settles it. Biddy's conscience can be at rest. She has done her best in a hopeless cause. But Mr. St. George shall never think again that I am too anxious to mix with his relations."

It was nearly midnight when Salome returned. She came in out of the fog and darkness radiantly cheerful and pleased with the world. She had been entertaining Anthony Wyndham and Shemus O'Brien at her club, and the evening had been an unqualified success. After they had dropped Anthony, she and Shemus had driven in a taxi half over London while he told her of his love affairs. Sallie began to laugh unsympathetically at the recollection, but suddenly becoming aware of a lack of attention in her listener, she broke off the recital.

"What's the matter, Miggs? You look as if something had happened."

"Nonsense, Sallie, don't be so imaginative. Nothing has happened except that I have had a lonely evening, and been bored with my own society. I'm always dull when you are out."

"Then why didn't you go out yourself? You might have paid Biddy a visit. You have neglected her shamefully since we have been up."

"I was there this afternoon, but she wasn't at home when I called."

"Oh!" Salome got up to throw her cloak on the sofa, and caught sight of Biddy's envelope, with the familiar blots and blackness, lying on the table. "Then what has she been writing to you about?"

"She wanted me to go round there this evening."

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't want to." Cecilia shifted her gaze uncomfortably, but the consciousness of her friend's keen eyes upon her was not to be ignored. "Sallie," she said appealingly, "don't stand there looking at me as if you were a Grand Inquisitor. I was tired—I had a headache. I had been shopping in the afternoon. You will be glad to hear that I matched the sugar-basin."

"Did you?" said Salome absently. She came and stood by the fire and met her friend's eyes in the glass. "You don't look as excited as you should be over such a joyful circumstance."

Cecilia dropped suddenly to the hearth-rug, and drew close to the fire. "I suppose I have a touch of the blues. The weather's been horrid all day; the fog seems to have got into my bones. I feel as if I wanted to get away from it all." She took up the poker restlessly, and bored through a mass of glowing coal. "I think I should like," she said, with an uncertain little laugh, "to make a hole right through the earth and come out at the Antipodes."

"New Zealand?" suggested Sallie quietly. "And then the Pole?"

"No, no!" cried Cecilia involuntarily. "Not the Pole! Anywhere but that!" She looked up guiltily and met Sallie's eyes. "Then Shemus was right!" was the latter's inward comment. She stared thoughtfully for a moment into the fire, then came to a swift decision—Sallie's decisions were usually swift. She dropped suddenly to the hearth-rug beside her friend.

"I'll tell you what, Miggs! We won't go to the Antipodes or the Pole. We'll go to the rising sun. Somewhere east of Suez—India, Japan; you know, we've always wanted it. You needn't bother about finance—I've just had a lovely big cheque from my publishers and I was wondering what I should do with it. Don't you feel the East a-calling? Tony and Shemus have been talking travel-talk all the evening till I feel as if I'd never been anything in my life but a Margate tripper. Tony will tell us the best places to go to and how to get there; we'll ask him to tea to-morrow. And that's another reason why it would suit me to leave England just now," she added inconsequently, with the little twist of her eyebrows that always heralded the introduction of one subject; "I happened to see Lionel as I was getting into the taxi with Shemus, and he looked more disgusted than he has any right to look. I see there will be nothing for it soon but to take that boy or to break with him and he is too good a friend to lose by doing either. It would be excellent discipline for him if I were to go off somewhere and leave no address. We'll do that, Miggs! We won't tell any one exactly where we are going, or when. We will just fold our tents like the Arabs, and silently steal away!"

CHAPTER VIII

INTO THE NIGHT

BIDDY, when she heard the news, sat down and cried over her thwarted schemes and ruined hopes.

It was all her fault; she hadn't done half enough. She had been cautious and cowardly; she had let herself be diverted from her purpose too easily by Bernard's disapproval, Jerry's illness, Harry's indifference, and Cecily's perversity. She had been clumsy and blundered in what she had attempted. She had been no true friend.

Then conscience suddenly shifted its point of attack. Was it not rather that instead of doing too little she had done too much? She had trusted too entirely to schemes and contrivances, and neglected the little common chances of every day, nay, deliberately frustrated them. She had sacrificed everything to her idea of one grand, triumphal, carefully stage-managed, epoch-making encounter between husband and wife. Would it not have been better to be simple and straightforward? If she had told Harry honestly that Celia was his wife, might he not have managed a meeting of his own contrivance and spared her further effort? She had tried to play the part of kindly providence and had interfered with the simple work-

ings of destiny. Her plotting and planning had been a hindrance rather than a help. Bernard was right after all; she would have done better to leave things alone.

From the abasing bitterness of this last admission Biddy sprang up with an impetuous resolve to make what still was possible of the unpromising situation. Now, at the eleventh hour, she would confess to Harry —she would show him his wife; she would paint her endearing qualities with no unsparing hand; she would touch his heart with pity over the possibilities suggested by Truman's assertion that Mrs. St. George had actually been in the nursery on the occasion of their last confidence there—which a handkerchief of Cecily's confirmed. It should be a changed and softened image of the woman he had married which he should take away with him. With the portrait of Celia in her hand she went in search of her brother-in-law.

She had last seen him reading a paper in the dining-room. He was not there now. As she stood deliberating where to look for him, Bernard unexpectedly came in. He had received an invitation for his wife and himself to motor down to his partner's place, meet a distinguished South African magnate at dinner, and spend the night there. Biddy received the proposition coldly. She hated all Stock Exchange people, she declared, particularly South Africans; and she thought it very unkind of Bernard to suggest spending one of his brother's few remaining days in England away from home; and Jerry's nurse, who had been away a fortnight, was returning that evening, and she wanted to see her when she came; and she didn't feel comfortable leaving the darling, even for a few

hours, with Truman, who was getting as deaf as a post. Bernard reasoned with her calmly and patiently, for his heart was set on the matter. He had just met his brother on the steps; he was going out now, and would only be back this evening in time to dress and go out again to dine with his friends—how much would they miss of his society? As for Jerry, it was an extraordinary thing if Truman, with two maids to help her, couldn't give an eye to the baby till his nurse returned. "I don't see myself," he said, "what difference her deafness makes, seeing the little fellow can't speak to her anyway. When he cries of course she can hear him. Anybody could."

Biddy's eye gathered fire, and her husband hastened to take a more propitiatory tone.

"Don't be a little goose, Biddy," he said, putting his arm round her. "I really think in some ways you are as young as Jerry. You needn't look as if I were Herod because I suggest that the boy does cry occasionally. All babies do. I know he's a good little chap as a rule. He'll be as right as rain with Truman; there's no earthly need for you to worry about him. Come to Cowley's with me and meet the Katterfelts. Katterfelt is quite a decent chap, though he is South African, and his wife is really a nice woman, Cowley says. She is an American, and you know you like Americans. I'm sure you would be glad to give her a better impression of Englishwomen as a class than she'll get from Mrs. Cowley and her friends. Come and show her that some of them at least know how to dress properly, and to look about seventeen when they are the mothers of families."

Only half-impressed by his blandishments, Biddy yielded to them. After all, it was absurd to think

that a few hours could make any difference with Harry and his affairs. "I can have that talk about Cecily with him as well to-morrow as to-day," she thought. "*Morgen ist auch ein Tag.*"

It was after midnight when Harry returned to his brother's house. He had had what should have been a cheerful evening with some half a dozen of his friends. His health had been drunk, and his success, and that of the expedition—his wonderful luck in finding a place in the latter at the eleventh hour had been freely pointed out to him. He was admitted on all hands to be favoured of the gods; there was not a man present who did not envy him. But with a kindly exaggeration of friendly sentiment, warmed up by the festivity of the occasion, it was made clear to him that nobody grudged him his good fortune. Each protested that if he couldn't go himself, St. George was the man he would have chosen to take his place.

From such a gathering he should have returned in lively, overflowing spirits, and he walked home, when he had been dropped by request at the door of a friend's house, moody and depressed to a degree most unusual with him. All through the evening he had been conscious of a sardonic aloofness of humour, an inexplicable inability to join in the sporting and patriotic enthusiasm of his friends. A curious, causeless melancholy had taken possession of him, which stole darkening over his mind, blotting out the bright anticipations of the last few weeks like the creeping shadow of an eclipse. Amid the cheerful laughter and talk of his companions he had fought against the obsession; now, walking through the dim, deserted streets, it gripped him unresistingly.

The night was such as passes in England for fine. The fogs and mists of the past week had for the moment lightened their gloom. A pale moon rode in the sky among rolling masses of umber-tinted cloud. St. George glanced at it as he entered the house. The next full moon he saw would be the radiant silver lamp of the tropics. He was glad to think of some days of bright sunshine, of blue sky and sea, before he entered on the frozen darkness of the Antarctic night.

The house struck him with a certain chill of desertedness as he entered, though there was no particular reason why it should—Bernard and Biddy had often gone upstairs on other nights when he came in. There was a telegram lying on the hall-table; he glanced at it and saw it was addressed to Mrs. Thornton; but he supposed it was of no consequence.

In the dining-room spirit-decanters and siphon had been left for him on the sideboard. He poured some whisky into a glass. There were the remains of a fire on the hearth, but the room seemed chill. Was it really such a cold night, or was it the effect of that creeping horror that was clouding his spirits? He had never been a superstitious man—unless there were superstition in his blind trusting to his own instincts and impulses. He did not believe even now that he was haunted by a shadow of coming evil.

"But what is it?" he said impatiently. "I'm perfectly well; I'm not sickening for anything. It isn't that. And the weather has been beastly, but it isn't that either. It would be a fine thing if I were to let myself be depressed because they had mislaid the sun for a week or two in England, when I'm shortly going to lose it out of my life altogether."

He filled up his glass from the siphon. As he did so he caught sight of the photograph signed "Celia," which Biddy had left upon the table, and wondered if it was worth while crossing the room to see if the mended leaf of the frame still held in place; but decided it wasn't. He was still looking at the girl's face, absently, however, as he took up his glass.

"Here's to you, Celia!" he said, more as an involuntary ejaculation to break the gloomy current of his thoughts than with any idea of what he was saying.

He lifted the glass to his lips.

He never drank it. Half-way to his mouth his hand was arrested. Some palpable, physical influence upon his senses dispelled in a moment his shadowy fancies. He put down the glass, walked to the door, and flung it open. The next minute he had dashed up the stairs.

Long, as it seemed to him, before he reached the second story his suspicion had been horribly confirmed. The air was heavy with the smell of burning; a faint line of smoke was issuing from beneath the door of the night nursery. As he wrenched it open and burst in, the room seemed full of smoke and flame. In the foreground the maid Truman was sleeping heavily in her bed, stupefied perhaps by the suffocating air. If there had been any wail of anguish or of dread from her charge, her ears had been too dull to hear it. Half-sick with horror, Harry looked across the room, and saw, through what appeared a sheet of fire, the child, in his white nightgown, too frightened to cry in more than a piteous whimper, his little face blanched with terror, crouching wide-eyed against the farthest bars of his cot, his teddy bear clutched in his arms.

Shaking the woman vigorously into the possession

of her waking faculties, St. George took in the situation. A flame was licking up the side of the wall where, he could only suppose, an electric wire had fused and fired the wooden casing. A leaping tongue had caught a fold of the curtain, which now hung, a blazing barrier, across the room. The light wooden rod supporting it was flaming too; burning fragments of stuff were falling on the drapery of the cot. Seizing a blanket from the bed, he dashed across the room, lifted the trembling child in his arms, and, enveloped in the heavy woollen folds, carried him through choking smoke and darting flame in safety to the passage.

As he carried him he heard a smothered wail, and to his surprise the baby he had thought paralyzed with fright struggled in his arms. Now when he put back the blanket he saw big tears rolling down the little white cheeks and the lips quivering piteously.

"Ba-ba!" said the child, pointing back with a trembling finger to his forsaken cot, at the foot of which, under a fold of burning curtain, with all four limbs waving wildly heavenward as if entreating against the doom that threatened instantly, was the teddy bear that Jerry loved as his own soul.

Far back in the years St. George remembered a headless wooden horse that, under some long-forgotten circumstances, had been flung to a flaming holocaust. He recalled the hideous desolation that had swept over his childish soul as he saw those wooden limbs charred and smouldering. Jerry's quivering lip made an irresistible appeal. He put the child into the arms of one of the frightened maids whom Truman's cries had roused.

"Don't cry, old chap," he said; "I 'll get him for you."

To make his way back to the cot was the work of a minute. Part of the bedclothing had already caught, but he thought it might be soon extinguished. The curtain flamed less fiercely; in parts it hung now, shrivelled and charred. He would just take the little kiddy his pet and then he would see——

Even as he spoke the words in his mind the curtain came crashing down, with rod and rings, before him, knocking over a light table at the foot of the maid's bed. At the same time something struck him a blow on the head. He lurched forward; his feet tangled in the still blazing drapery, and he fell. He went down with all force among fire and flame and struck against something as he fell—something that seemed to go red-hot through sight and brain. He had a moment of blinding, unendurable agony, then—oh, mercy!—sense left him, and he was in darkness.

The trembling maids dragged him into safety, and, later, sense came back to let him suffer again. But the darkness was to last his life.

PART III

CHAPTER I

CECILIA ASSERTS HERSELF

"THE irony! Oh, the irony of it!" wailed Salome. "A man who has risked death all over the world and come home unscathed! And in a London nursery—one would have thought the safest place on earth—he loses everything that means life to him for the sake of a child's toy!"

She sat in the window of her sister's pretty chintz-hung drawing-room. Across the lawn she could see the bright, uncertain sunshine and the chasing shadows of an April day. The trees at the end of the garden were radiant in their tender green, buttercups and celandines made specks of gold in the emerald meadows beyond; above the quickset hedge the cherry orchard showed a tremor of virginal white against the cloudy blue sky, while the birds sang their love songs from the coppice.

The room was still fragrant with the scent of bridal flowers, for there had been a wedding in the house not two days before. She and her friend, delayed in their return to England by a matter of quarantine, had travelled straight to Chardleigh to be present at it. The letter conveying the date of her sister's marriage had fortunately reached Salome. Owing to their

uncertain movements and vagueness of address, a large portion of her correspondence and Cecilia's was still wandering at large in the East—among it those letters which should have informed the latter of her husband's misfortune. It was only on the afternoon of the wedding-day that the news, delayed by the counsel of Elizabeth, had been gently broken to her by her friend.

Salome wondered still over the manner of her reception of it. She broke out in no exclamations or comments, but quietly announced her intention of travelling up to London immediately and learning all particulars from Biddy; and, disregarding all protests and settling all her own arrangements in a rapid and assured fashion, Cecilia, who always waited to have her decisions made and her trains looked out for her, calmly carried out that intention.

Only once or twice before, in the face of some startling emergency, had Salome caught a glimpse of her friend in this mood, when some secret force seemed to have lifted her out of herself and above all her customary timidities and hesitations. The mood had never been lasting. But this time Cecilia had returned from town with something of the same quiet resolution in look and tone, and though her face, in its pallor, had lost the flush of travel, and her eyes had the brooding fixity of one who has faced some horror, her manner had the calm of a settled purpose.

She sat in the window-seat looking out into the garden, with its gleams and shade, its flush of white and green, the cloudy brightness of its spring beauty, and in answer to her friend's breathless, pitying questions, dropped word by word the confirmation of the tragedy.

"He is absolutely, incurably blind?"

"Absolutely."

"And—and he hasn't tried to blow his brains out?"

"Not so far as I know."

Salome was silent for some minutes. Then she came across to her friend and put both hands on her shoulders.

"You may as well be honest with me, Cecil. You have the air of one who is facing a desperate situation. You are thinking you ought to go to your husband."

"And if I were!" responded Cecilia, playing with her wedding-ring. "Wouldn't it be my duty?"

"No," said Sallie bluntly. "You have no duties towards your husband. It would be a piece of sheer, gratuitous, uncalled-for self-sacrifice, and I object to it. If you go to your husband—if you give up your whole life to his service, as I suppose you mean to do— you will spend the rest of your days in his darkness——"

"And you think I shan't even lighten that darkness."

"Oh, you may—in a way. You may make a little glimmer in the blackness. But no more, and perhaps not that. All the rest of his existence will probably be a fight with the devils of despair. It's quite likely he would prefer to fight it out alone. Seriously, Cecil, what could you or any woman do to make things tolerable to a man who has lost what Harry St. George has lost? When I think what blindness must mean to him—the absolute cutting off from everything that has hitherto made the happiness of his life—I wonder he is able to go on with it!"

"He has 'gone on with it' now for six months, and he has never tried, as you say, to blow his brains out.

It looks as if he meant, somehow or other, to fight through the rest of his life."

"Then if he has lived through the first six months of his blindness," said Sallie, suddenly shifting her ground, "we may suppose he has lived through the worst of it. However shattering a blow may be, if you are going to get used to it at all you have begun to do so by the end of the first half year."

"I don't think so. You know—everybody knows—that the first days of a great calamity are not always the worst. There is a certain excitement that bears one up. Besides, for some months Harry was ill, and illness is always abnormal. It is the dead level afterwards that tries the fortitude of a man who has borne the first shock bravely enough. When health comes back, and there is nothing more to fear, but nothing to hope, and life goes on and on! It is now, I think, that Harry most needs a companion. Of course, he might hire one. He has his own servant to look after him; I suppose he might engage a secretary too, and a reader. But it is dreadful to think of any one so helpless as a blind man being dependent only on hired attendance. There are ways in which a woman could spare him which no man would be quick enough to see. There is a sympathy, and there are services, which a man only takes easily from a woman, and the woman whose life is bound up in his. He told me once there was no place for a wife in his life. There may be now."

"'When pain and anguish wring the brow!'" murmured Salome absently

"*Sallie!*"

"Darling! I'm not laughing! Who could laugh in the face of such ghastly tragedy? I am only

considering the old traditional idea—and the justice of it—that a man must have what he wants just when, and where, and because he wants it, and woman's only mission is to see that he gets it. I can't help thinking of you, my Cecil. Why should your life, which is worth just as much to you as Harry St. George's to him, be wasted on a blind, broken man? You will give all your life to patch up his—and you won't do it—effectually! You know what happens with a patched thing—the rents are only made worse. Your husband's future can never be more than a sort of living death, and you will have to share that with him. And for what reward? You will be eyes to him, wife, nurse, friend, consoler, and sympathizer—and all that you are or can be he would give for the sight of one of his eyes for one hour of every day."

"I know," said Cecilia unsteadily. "I am not thinking that anything that I can do will make up to him for what he has lost. But I must do what I can. He went out of his way once to be kind to me when I had no claim upon him. But for him I might still be living with John and Emmeline, a dull and hopeless drudge. All that I have had in these last years of my life I owe to him. Don't you think that gives him some claim on me?"

"Not a husband's claim. According to you he relinquished that absolutely and entirely, from the day of your marriage. Give up his money if you like, and come and live with me. But don't sacrifice your whole life to an imaginary duty and a very doubtful good. I am afraid you don't realize, Cecil, what you may be undertaking. An awful, overwhelming disaster such as this of your husband's sometimes brings out unexpected strength or weakness in a man's

character. Nothing you have known of Harry St. George up to the present can help you to form an idea of what he may have become under the shock of his misfortune. He may be taking it heroically, fighting his devils in secret and making no sign—and if that is so he won't want you or any one near him; or he may have given up hopelessly, as other men have done who seemed as strong as he—in which case, God help the woman who is tied to him! He will take all your sacrifices without gratitude or consideration. He will be querulous, bitter, suspicious, and unreasonable. All that you do he will accept as no more than his due, something given him to make up for what he has lost; but he will never think, or allow you to imagine, that it does make up for it. You will be his nurse, his slave, his dog—always at hand to be beaten when anything goes wrong, or the burden of his life gets intolerable. Cecil, I've seen men turn like that to their wives when they had lost their health, men who were decently kind and considerate when they were well and strong. A sick soul is an awful thing! And to be bound to that night and day! To give up your life and all its possibilities for that, and a man who doesn't ask it of you, who doesn't expect such a sacrifice, who would never miss it or think of it if you didn't offer it! It is too much!"

Cecilia's face had whitened, and her eyes were dark and fixed, as if she looked into this picture of her future and saw worse things there than any that her friend described. But her voice when she spoke was gentle and unmoved.

"Sallie, dear, I think you are taking an extreme view. Men aren't, as a rule, all coward or all hero—they have their strong moments and their weak ones.

Biddy does not speak as if Harry had taken his loss like a craven; but, however brave he seems, there must be times when his courage gives way. He may not always want sympathy and companionship—there must be dark moods when all he wishes is to be alone; but there may be others when he doesn't want solitude, or other men near him to help him play the hero, but——"

"But a wife to grumble out his soul to!" Salome struck in. "Oh, I dare say; it's very likely. We know what men are."

"Well," said Cecilia, "if that is so, I am Harry St. George's wife. Nobody can take that place with him now but me. I stand between him and any other woman who might give him help and comfort now when he needs both so desperately. I didn't think of that at the time of our marriage—we neither of us did. I married him selfishly, for my own convenience, and I fancied there was to be nothing but an empty ceremony between us. But as he himself said to me: 'You can't play tricks with the marriage service without a certain risk.' That empty ceremony has left me with a responsibility towards him that I can't get away from. I have taken the place of some woman who might have loved him, and everything I can give now isn't too much to make up for that wrong."

Sallie sat looking pensively before her. "A woman who loved him," she repeated slowly and thoughtfully. Suddenly she laid both hands on her friend's shoulders and looked keenly down into her eyes.

"Cecil," she said softly, "do you?"

Cecilia glanced up, startled; then she coloured

all over her face and shrank away. "No, *no!*" she said hurriedly. "How could I?"

"Why, quite easily, if it comes to that. You have never heard anything but what is good or interesting of your husband, and you have seen next to nothing of him. Then he has treated you with much kindness and absolute indifference—could any combination be more favourable to the growth of love? If my lion could manage to treat me with real, genuine, unaffected indifference for a whole year, I should probably be ready to be his lioness at the end of it. And then he is your husband. That mere fact gives a man an interest in a woman's eyes that it sometimes takes quite a long experience of matrimony to dispel."

"And the mere fact that she is his wife robs a woman of all interest in a man's."

"Well, it takes away a certain amount of her charm," admitted Sallie, who was always easily diverted into a generalization. "If he hasn't done it before marriage, a man isn't very likely to fall in love with his wife afterwards—except," she added hastily, "under exceptional circumstances."

Cecilia had moved away, and sat staring fixedly out of the window with her hands clasped round her knee.

"I suppose," she said slowly, "if it were a question of love, it would make what I think of doing easier for some women and harder for others. To me, if it were love, and that only, it would be impossible. But this is something quite different. It is pity, stronger than any feeling I have ever had in my life, and a sense of responsibility. You know, Sallie, how it was with my marriage. I did so hate the life I was living, and Harry St. George offered me so much for

what seemed so little. I bought liberty for myself, and all sorts of good things have come to me from that liberty and made my life rich. But I have never felt happy about the price of my bargain. It wasn't enough for all I have had. All these years a mountain of debt has been piling up between us, and the thought that I could make no recompense has oppressed me more and more. Now, at last, there seems a chance that I might do something to pay back." She broke off abruptly. "I may be quite wrong," she added after a minute, smiling through a mist of tears her own earnestness had brought into her eyes. "Harry may not want me or my services. It may be still the only kindness I can do him to keep our lives apart."

Salome drew closer and put her arm affectionately round her friend.

"You dear thing! As if any poor maimed wretch wouldn't be lucky to have you in his life. Your husband *must* learn to worship the sound of your voice. I suppose a woman might teach any man to love her, as you teach a parrot to talk, by keeping him in the dark and giving him an occasional lump of sugar. You have your poor vagabond caged and blinded; you have only to be a little nice to him sometimes, and I dare say he will be ready to say anything you want him to say."

"Sallie," said Cecilia earnestly, "I do wish you wouldn't talk like that."

"Then I won't, Miggs dear. I know I am behaving most evilly about all this. But, you see, I am jealous. I wanted you for my own companion. You are such a dear, comfortable thing to live with. I thought ours was a marriage of true minds, and we were going to be always sufficient to ourselves. And now a man comes

between, and our friendship goes the way of all women's friendships."

"No, Sallie," Cecilia put her hand on her friend's, "don't say that. I want you just as much as ever. But if I hadn't been Harry St. George's wife, I could never have been your friend. My first duty is to him."

After this little outburst of impulsive speech and demonstration there was a silence of some duration. Salome broke it with a sudden drop out of the realm of high emotion into the world of practical reality, which perhaps accounted for the shade of constraint and hesitation in her voice.

"And when are you going to join your husband?"

Cecilia drew away her hand, flushing scarlet.

"Sallie, I can't go to him! We are strangers to one another. He doesn't know anything about me. He wouldn't want me."

Sallie's eyebrows suggested bewilderment. "But, Cecil, darling. Surely you had considered that before!"

"You see," the other went on, twisting and intertwining her fingers distressfully, "he made it so clear that I was to be nothing but a legal wife; I can't go to him and deliberately suggest that I should be anything more!"

"Then, my dear girl, what have we been talking about for the last hour?"

Cecilia said nothing for a moment. Then she turned to her friend with a quick, impulsive gesture.

"Salome, what I am going to propose sounds wildly absurd and unpractical; but Biddy and I talked it over, and we agreed, if it were possible, it would be the best thing to do. I told you Harry had left

Bernard. He has gone, with just his servant and a housekeeper, to an old house that was his uncle's, here in Devonshire. It is in a very quiet, secluded little village called Combe Carey."

"I know it," said Sallie. "I cycled through it once with Lionel. It was scarcely a village, just a handful of cottages in the hollow of a cliff. Lal only took me through it because there was a tiny inn there where they sold a particularly good sort of beer. It is not far from Silverton."

"It is a picturesque little place," continued Cecilia, slowly and with difficulty, "and there is an artist's cottage there which at present is to let . . . which might be taken for the summer months by two people who wanted quiet, a Miss Verrinder, perhaps, and a friend, a widow, called Mrs. Cecil. . . . Oh, you are thinking," she broke off, flushing sensitively, "that it sounds like one of Sarah Verity's plots. Sallie, I'm not imagining anything romantic—I'm not planning a love-story. I only want an opportunity to make friends, to see if there is any possible bond of sympathy between us, whether I should be any help and comfort to him or—or just a bore. And I can only find that out by meeting him in a character that is not my own. I know what he would think if I went to him as his wife, or rather as the Miss Ward with whom he went through a form of marriage. He scarcely remembers my Christian name, and I think he has the vaguest recollection of what I looked like, but he remembers me so—so unattractive that the last thing he would desire is my companionship for life. But he would probably agree to put up with it because it would pain and embarrass him to refuse. Do you think a marriage like that would be endurable?

If there is any change in me from what there was he couldn't see it. To him I should always be the old Cecilia—a worse Cecilia than you ever knew! And I should really be that to him and nothing else for the rest of my life. I can't get away from other people's conception of me. But if we met as strangers and made friends, as in such a tiny place we could scarcely help doing, we should have a chance of finding out if there could ever be any kind of comradeship between us. And if I saw there was no promise of it, I need not even reveal myself at all, I should simply take myself away out of his life for ever."

"And leave him neither bound nor free?"

"No, in that case," said Cecilia, paling slightly, "I should let him divorce me. Such a marriage as ours should not be difficult to annul. And if there were another woman who could be to him what I could not, I would not be a bar between him and his happiness."

She sat for some minutes staring straight before her. "Will you come with me, Sallie?" she asked then, turning rather wistfully to her friend.

"My dear," said Sallie trenchantly, "I wouldn't let you go without me on any consideration. What a girl like you, with a passion for self-sacrifice in her blood, needs above all things is a hard-headed, cold-hearted, thoroughly selfish friend. I shall most certainly accompany you, whether you want me or not, if it is only to see you don't make a suttee-victim of yourself to satisfy some imaginary claim."

"You won't need to pretend anything," observed Cecilia, "for Biddy says Harry has never heard your name in connection with me. You won't have to tell any lies."

"I shouldn't mind telling them in the least if it were necessary. I much prefer an honest lie to a prevarication. It always seems to me that if you are going to deceive people you don't make things a bit better by deceiving them under a guise of the truth."

Her thoughts were not in her words. Her quick wits busied themselves with the proposition before her—considering it not as Sarah Verity the writer, but Salome Verrinder the friend. Truly it was a situation the former might have contrived. But she, Salome, could not write her friend's story for her. She could not make the wheels of her destiny glide smoothly along prescribed lines to a certain happy ending. In real life she recognized the immalleability of circumstance—the crisscross of chance—the points that just swerved by a hair's breadth, the tangling intersections, the lines that never met. By such slight accidents had Cecilia already missed happiness. And now—what happiness was there to hope for in her life?

A glance at her companion showed her the needlessness of any word of warning. Cecilia was obviously not considering happy endings. She sat with her head on her hand, staring absently at the bright spring sunshine which flooded the pretty country drawing-room. One ray fell on the massed white blooms that still suggested bridal festivities. In the nursery overhead, where the youngest bridesmaid of two days before was acting over the ceremony with herself as the principal figure and the reluctant page of the previous occasion figuring as the still more reluctant bridegroom of this, the gramophone was playing merrily Mendelssohn's Wedding March. The gay, exultant strains mingled with

Cecilia's thoughts, and she could almost have laughed at its mockery. Yet two days before it had sounded quite in keeping when pretty Joyce, amid flowers and sunshine and a triumphant clash of bells, went off light-heartedly with her handsome young soldier to a future that seemed all rose colour. That was to be Joyce's life, sunshine and rose colour—and hers, shadow and darkness. Her thought went forward without faltering but with no bright lifting of hope. The denial of the life her friend had pictured in such sombre tones was no denial at all to Cecilia, and the shadows did not frighten her; but there was a sacrifice in the future she envisaged—a very real and bitter one, though it was one which Sallie had not discussed, and probably could not realize. It was only for a few minutes, however, that she allowed herself the contemplation of it. Then she shook off the cloud of melancholy that had held her and turned to her friend with a smile.

"The artist at Combe Carey christened his retreat Arden. You can be Rosalind if you like, but I must certainly be Celia. You won't call me anything but that, Sallie, except Miggs. You understand it is a comedy we are going to play. We can't help Harry by carrying things through in a high, tragic vein. We must be bright and cheerful. We must act our comedy light-heartedly, and ignore the tragedy lying underneath."

"There never was a comedy acted in this world that didn't have to do that," observed Sallie, with uncharacteristic bitterness.

CHAPTER II

ARDEN

"MRS. RIDGE, sir, thought you might like to know that the house next door is taken."

St. George went on pulling his dog's ears with listless inattention. There were days when the conversation of his servant Myles afforded him some slight amusement, but this was not one of them. Quite unrebuffed, the man continued his task of clearing the breakfast-table, with an air of stolid patience.

"Mrs. Ridge," he began again, after a decent interval—Myles himself was an insatiable gossip, and the housekeeper a woman with a passion for minding her own business, but he was accustomed to deliver his carefully garnered scraps of information to his master with this preface, and with an air of mute acknowledgment that as men they were above heeding such trifles, but women must be allowed to babble—"Mrs. Ridge, sir, says that a lady of the name of Cecil——"

"What's that, Myles," said Harry, rousing himself, "the house next door taken? I didn't know there was a house next door."

"Well, sir, it isn't, rightly speaking, next door, nor yet a house; but the garden does run alongside ours

for a bit. And it's the nearest building to us, sir."

"But it's only a cottage. There are nothing but labourers' cottages within a mile of us. At least, there were when I knew the place."

"It *is* a labourer's cottage, sir; leastways it was. But a year or two ago, Mrs. Ridge says, an artist and his wife came down here and had two or three of these places knocked into one, and made a cottage orny of it, sir."

"A cottage—oh, yes, I see. And that's let?"

"Yes, sir. It isn't the kind of place, Mrs. Ridge says to me, as you or I would like to live in—brick floors, with just a rug or two about, and a brick fireplace with a settle, and a dresser with pewter-pots in the sitting-room, and the stairs going up at the corner—everything most uncomfortable, just as the gentry like to have it nowadays, asking your pardon, sir."

"And who's taken it?

"A Mrs. Cecil, sir. A widow lady, seemingly."

"It will be rather quiet for her. Is she all alone?"

"There's no family, sir. The lady has a friend or a companion living with her, whose name Mrs. Ridge didn't catch. They are both youngish women, she says. They drove over here one day, and the next week the house was taken by a Mr. West, a solicitor from London."

He watched his master's face in vain for any gleam of recognition or attention. St. George sat with his sightless eyes fixed on space, pulling his dog's ears as if he had no other interest in life.

"Mrs. Ridge says"—the undaunted gossip began afresh.

"Is the table quite clear, Myles?"

"Yes, sir."

His attendant, taking the hint, caught up the tablecloth with alacrity, and vanished.

For some minutes after his footsteps had ceased to echo along the stone passage St. George sat still, absently stroking the head of his dog, whose muzzle was thrust forward upon his knee. Then he roused himself, put the dog's head gently aside, and made his way to a distant table, where a typewriter stood in its case. The room where he had breakfasted was also the room in which he was accustomed to spend most of his morning hours, for it had a southern aspect, and since his blindness Harry had loved the sunshine. He always thought the darkness seemed less thick about him when he felt its kindly ray. With careful, studied movements he released the machine from its case, fixed his paper, and began slowly to type. Up till now he had left it to Myles to arrange the preliminaries for him. There was a sense of exultation in managing the whole business himself. Certainly the boundaries of his powers were enlarging.

For about half an hour nothing was heard in the room but the deliberate, uncertain clicking of the typewriter and an occasional deep sigh from Scout as he moved himself into a more comfortable position in the sunshine. Then the typist lay back in his chair with a yawn.

"There, that's finished! Gad! Scout, my boy, we are getting on. We can write letters now. What d'you think of that, my dog? It's been a long job, but I don't believe there is a single mistake in it, and the joy of good work done is ours. Life isn't without its simple little pleasures even now." He smiled suddenly, a twisted, unmirthful smile. "By Jove,

Scoutie, we are like a man who has lost a sovereign and found three-ha'pence."

He got up and rang the bell.

"Myles," he said, when that faithful servitor appeared, "there is a letter on the typewriter. Seal it up, and address it to Mr. Bernard Thornton."

"Yes, sir," responded Myles uneasily.

He walked to the table, but his master's ears caught no sound of any further movement.

"What's the matter?" he asked, turning quickly.

"There's no letter here, sir," said Myles nervously.

"Not on the machine? I fixed it there myself."

"But there was no ribbon in the typewriter, sir," faltered Myles. "I took the old one off yesterday, sir, and I hadn't time to fix the new. I didn't know you would be using the machine this morning, without me."

"And there's nothing on the paper?"

"Nothing that you could call a letter, sir," answered the man, staring at the perfectly blank sheet.

His master caught a swift, sharp exclamation between his clenched teeth. A sudden rage of revolt at his blind helplessness seized him. The thing was a trifle, but it was trifles such as these, taking him unawares, that broke through the studied stoicism with which he tried to front the world. He had schooled himself to endurance in great matters; the most careful tutoring could not make him insensible to the sting of having made himself absurd, the tormenting conviction that all through his life, in the darkest hours of pain and loss, he was never secure from being an object of ridicule. He had imagined for the moment that he was beginning to conquer some of his limitations. This was the jeer of Fate.

The incident might be trivial, but it helped to drag him back to that dark mood of despair from which his most cheerful moments never carried him far, in which he wished that light and life had gone out together.

Myles stood and watched him, his wooden face stirred with a touch of compassion. He was not a man of any perception, but some of life's sorrows are writ so large that even the Myleses of the world cannot fail to read them.

"Shall I put the ribbon in the typewriter, sir?" he questioned, with hesitation.

"Oh, damn the typewriter!"

Myles shifted heavily from one foot to the other.

"Shan't I shut the window, sir?"

"The window? No. The room's like a vault with the window shut. One might as well be dead and buried at once."

"It's as you like, sir, of course," said the man, who, like most of his class, hated fresh air in the house as the pestilence. "Only your papers are blowing all about anyhow, sir."

"The papers can blow to the devil!" For a moment he was minded to send his servant in the same direction. Then he repented of his show of temper. "It will be all right if you shut the door," he said quietly. "The letter wasn't of any immediate consequence. You can put in the ribbon some time during the day. I shan't be typing any more this morning. But we mustn't have the window shut. I want to see the grass growing and the wind blowing."

The last words were addressed, not to Myles, who, having elaborately arranged paper-weights on all loose sheets, was preparing to withdraw, but

to Scout, with whom he had fallen into a habit of conversing out loud. The dog wagged his stump of a tail with a quivering eagerness of sympathy and understanding. The two-legged attendant retired, shaking his head over his master's obvious madness.

St. George strolled across to the window. It was no exaggeration to say that a room with the window shut was to him a vault. It was not fresh air he missed, but the breath of life. Here at the open casement he could hear and feel if he could not see. His ear had always been acute—the ear of a hunter, of a man accustomed to feel death stalking him in secret, shadowy places. With his loss of sight this had sharpened with his other senses. As he knelt forward in the window-seat now, with his head against the frame, he seemed to catch every sound that made up the harmony of the summer morning—the barking of a dog and the sleepy crowing of a cock in one of the cottage-gardens, the lowing of cattle in the meadows beyond, the breaking of the surf on the rocks below, the sharp whetting of a scythe, the drowsy hum of bees, the whirr of insects in the grass, the flutter of tiny wings, the stir of leaf and twig in the breeze.

"Life's still going on, old boy," he said to the listening Scout, "though we're all out of it. We're not buried so deep that we can't feel the grass growing over our head."

For a moment the muscles of his face quivered as a sharp inward stab caught his breath. Then the lines of his mouth tightened. He thrust his hands more deeply into his pockets.

"We've just got to set our teeth and bear it, Scout; it's no use dropping our tails. We've got

years of it yet to go through. I was thirty-seven last month. There's every reasonable prospect that I shall live for thirty-seven years longer. None of my people went out at less than seventy, except my father, who was shot, and we've lost the chance of any such happy ending as that, I'm afraid, in the life we are going to lead now, bad cess to it! Do you think you could stick it out for thirty-seven years, Scout? Well, thank God! you're a little dog, and won't have to!"

Scout, very erect on his haunches, had listened so far with mute, adoring eyes fixed on the face that could give him no glance in response. He felt that some more marked expression of sympathy was now needed, and thrust a moist nose into his master's hand. Harry bent down and patted him kindly. There was much affection between the two.

Scout was a handsome dog, of a cross-breed between a bull-dog and fox-terrier, combining in his person the better points of both ancestors, giving to the agility and alert intelligence of the terrier something of the bull-dog's massive strength and grim tenacity. He had been presented to Harry by a friend on learning of his misfortune, as the son of a mother who for years had been a blind man's attendant and who was himself to be recommended for his intelligence and trustworthy qualities.

What disappointment there may have been in the mind of Scout in the early days of their companionship is only to be guessed. From all those subtle signs and tokens by which his kind scent out character, he had passed his new owner as the kind of master any dog of sense and spirit would be pleased to possess. He anticipated a cheerfully intimate

fellowship, long tramping walks—sporting walks—the rough, teasing caress, the short, sharp word of command plain to be understood, and he found himself condemned to the slow, measured pacing of the blind, the check and watchfulness of those who attend infirmity, to long hours of silence under a brooding shadow that darkened his own soul with a vague, sympathetic anguish. But, with the self-surrender of his race, he resigned, unquestioning, the fair prospects of freedom, and gave himself up to his new master with whole-souled devotion, asking no greater joy in life than to share his sorrow.

In the first months of his blindness no companion could have been more to Harry's mind, no society oppressed him less, no sympathy soothed him more. Of sympathy and consideration, from the first day that the result of his accident was known, there had been no lack. From Bernard and Biddy to the outermost circle of his acquaintance nothing but kindness and pity had been shown. Bernard, shaken out of his customary cool, fastidious composure, had broken down into something like boyish sobbing when he tried to tell his brother that he would never see again. Biddy had tended him through his illness with a fervour of gratitude and unreasoning remorse. All that loving care could do to lighten or alleviate his suffering, that modern resource could supply or money pay for, had been at his service. Yet with the first beginnings of returning health, as he roused himself slowly from the lethargy of weakness that had succeeded the grim endurance of pain, his strongest instinct was to get away.

In part this was the invalid's sick desire for a change—any change—that would remove him from

an environment grown hateful with remembered suffering; but still more was it the longing to be alone —to get away from his fellows with their cruel superiority of sight, to accustom himself to the horrible humiliation of helplessness, to adjust his ideas to his changed lot, to pick up the broken pieces of his life, and see what—if anything—of worth was left to him.

When Bernard first heard of this desire he was unaffectedly distressed. He had been shaken out of his ordinary calm, self-centred equanimity by the shock of the tragedy that had so nearly touched his own life. He was honestly anxious to do everything in his power for the brother who had saved his child from a horrible death. He did not forget that the fall which had occasioned his brother's blindness had occurred, not in connection with the child's rescue, but in the characteristically harebrained attempt to save a useless toy. This fact, which touched Biddy to the depths of her heart, Bernard hugged to himself in secret comfort, as lightening the pressure of what would otherwise have been an almost intolerable burden of gratitude. But to the utmost capacity of his nature he was grateful. He was anxious to show every conceivable kindness and consideration.

But delicate tact, that fine flower of unselfish sympathy, is not to be cultivated in a single day in a soil of arid egotism. With the best intentions in the world, Bernard jarred constantly on his brother's shrinking susceptibilities. The very tone he adopted, the superior, pitying tone of the man in health to the unreasoning sick, was, when the days of his actual invalidism were past, a trial to his senior. All his life he had unconsciously cherished a secret, good-humoured contempt for his young brother's lim-

itations, and the smaller world that satisfied him. Now he suddenly found their positions reversed. Bernard's world might be narrow, but he walked in it with a free step, a man amongst men. And he—what was he but a poor creeping thing, maimed and broken, bound to crawl out of the path of his fellows if he would avoid being trodden upon? An object of pity—of kindest pity, perhaps—but a man who no longer counted. He was helpless and in the dark, and the world—his own glad, free world, of boundless space and limitless delights—had rolled away out of his sight for ever.

Well, he would stick it out—men had endured worse! But he was not obliged—thank God and Uncle Henry!—to stick it out here in London. At the best of times he had never been able to stand too much of London. He loathed it now. Shock and weakness had broken his nerve; the noises of the streets filled him with a painful, unreasoning horror that he hated himself for feeling but strove against in vain. He could not endure the thought of making his first sorry attempts at walking along the crowded thoroughfares of town. Something in him cried out fiercely for the soothing silence and solitude of the country. There was that old cottage in Devonshire which Uncle Henry had left him—Mallory said it was vacant just now—he might as well go there as anywhere. The air was good, he remembered it as a boy, and the place was quite out of the world, which was what he wanted. He would take Myles and get a woman to see to things, and vegetate there for a month or two.

Biddy was outraged at the very idea. She had intended to give every spare minute to making up

to Harry for what he had lost through her and hers. In her picture of the future she and Bernard and little Jerome were to spend the rest of their lives revolving in ceaseless devotion about the couch of their benefactor, anticipating his lightest wish. That he should remove himself altogether from the sphere of their ministrations called out her strongest protest.

In face of this Bernard's own protest grew gradually fainter. In this he showed himself not wholly selfish, and Harry could not blame him. Biddy was not very strong at the time; she had taken the accident and its consequences vehemently to heart, brooding and fretting herself into a morbid dread of life's terrors. Under the circumstances any husband might be forgiven for considering his wife's health and desiring the removal of a presence which was a daily pain and distress to her.

Harry entirely understood and sympathized with his feeling. Nothing was more intolerable to him than that the shadow of his darkness should fall on his bright little sister-in-law. He was more anxious to remove himself than Bernard could be to let him go. He could not rid himself of the idea that with his sightless eyes and groping step he must be a horrible and repulsive object. Biddy had assured him positively that it was not so, and that the doctors said that he would not permanently be greatly disfigured; but was that not one of the kindly lies the seeing tell so safely to the blind? He would not risk it. From the earliest days of his convalescence, when he had picked himself up, bruised and broken, from the shattering blow which had laid his life in ruins, one fixed idea had possessed him—he must not let himself be a bother and a burden on the lives of others; to

avoid that was the one object left him in life. Happier than some men who had suffered his cruel loss, he had means of his own; he could go where he liked, and do what he chose, and pay for any service that he needed. All the care and attention that affection gave him he took with gratitude, but secretly, with even deeper thankfulness, he hugged to himself the thought of his independence.

Without understanding all his motives, Biddy grasped the truth at last.

"I believe," she said wistfully, "you will be happier away from us!"

"Much happier," he agreed, with a smile, "in feeling that you are not making yourself wretched about me."

"I shall be wretched about you," said Biddy tremulously, "all my life. But I see now that it would be the kindest thing for us to let you go."

"The kindest of all your kindnesses, little Biddy!"

He put his hand out gropingly to hers, and her hot tears fell as she clasped it in her own. Then she fled sobbing from the room, and locked herself up to indite an impassioned appeal to her sister-in-law—which the latter never received.

She was not the only one whose thoughts turned to Cecilia as a possible help and comfort in that hour of blackness. Bernard, sinking all prejudices, and laying aside the unacknowledged promptings of self-interest in an honest attempt to make the best of his brother's broken life, himself broached the subject.

"I really wish," he suggested, on the eve of the departure, "that you would let us send for your wife."

"On no account!" said Harry with decision. "I should have thought I scarcely needed to point out

to you that our marriage was an absolute formality. That we should tend one another in our old age and infirmities was no part of the bargain."

"Of course, my dear fellow. I have always understood that. But, you know, not one woman in ten would look upon a marriage—any sort of a marriage—in that cold-blooded, businesslike light. Certainly not Cecilia. She is a good creature really. The kind of woman who would simply enjoy sacrificing herself. You might let me get Biddy to write to her."

"I don't think I will trouble Biddy, thanks," rejoined Harry dryly. "I should be sorry to deprive my wife of any pleasure, but, fortunately, I no longer require a nurse, and as companions I don't fancy we should add to one another's happiness. I shall do very well with Myles. He's an ass, of course, and has conceit enough to sink a Dreadnought; but he's honest and faithful; I don't think he will rob or ill-treat me when he gets me at his mercy in the wilds of Devon. And Biddy has found me a jewel of a housekeeper. I shall be comfortable enough, old chap. And as for being alone—well, it's what I'm going for."

He had had some two months now of being alone, and was beginning to feel, if not yet to admit to himself, that he had had about enough of it.

He had no love of solitude for its own sake; it had never been his intention to cut himself off permanently from his kind. He had fled to the wilderness as a suitable setting for his initiation into a new life. He was to learn a new lesson. He could never be anything now that normal people could encounter without a feeling of shock—the thing to be done was to make himself as little loathsome as possible. To this end he had set himself

almost from the first to struggle against the helplessness, carelessness, and slovenliness into which he might so easily have lapsed. The one present aim of this lifelong rebel against convention was to become as much of an ordinary man as might be.

There had been an interest at first in finding his feet, in testing his growing physical strength and the capacities of his sharpening senses. There were days when he could manage to close down, as it were under lock and key, certain chambers of his mind, the home of memory and ever-haunting regret—to live fiercely in the present, to concentrate himself on the doings of the moment, the small, insignificant conquests gained over helplessness and dependence. There was some pleasure and some triumph in these slight achievements, and he made the most of it with unconscious philosophy. He had lost a sovereign—the solid gold of life had slipped irrevocably through his fingers—but there were still odd ha'pence to be picked up with care and searching.

But there were days that defied philosophy—when the imprisoned bitterness rushed back on him with all its force, when all his acquirements seemed contemptible, when he felt himself bound and fettered by his limitations and a mocking Fate seemed to laugh at his efforts to free himself. One such day was this, when his courage ebbed, when he felt the greatness of the loss that cut him off from his fellows and was oppressed with the burden of his solitary days, but was too proud to face the humiliation of returning to society under his altered conditions.

Myles's communication stirred but a faint ripple of interest in his mind. By the end of the day he had forgotten it altogether.

It was soft spring weather. He took a stroll round the garden after dinner—wishing that he cared to smoke—and wandered out through the gate on to the path over the cliffs, with Scout trotting patiently and watchfully beside him.

The road was familiar to his feet; he walked in almost careless security. He remembered it well from a visit he had paid here in his boyhood. There was a path leading from the cliffs to the beach, down which he had often slipped in the evening after dining with his uncle and gone for a row in the moonlight. There was a boat of his on the beach there now; he had taken Myles with him the other day and rowed for an hour. He had been rather pleased at first to find that he could; but it was dull work pulling the oar and seeing no progress—one might as well be a galley-slave. There was nothing in it—nothing in all his efforts to fight his disabilities and follow the pursuits of ordinary men. He never could be an ordinary man. What would be the merit of any of his achievements? Why, as Johnson said of a woman preaching or a dog walking on its hind legs—not in the fact that the thing was well done, but that it was done at all. And then some day (his morning experience with the typewriter still rankling) he would find himself rowing a boat tied to a stake, or some such absurdity, and thoughtless spectators would jeer, and decent people would suppress a smile because they were sorry for him. He would just escape being ridiculous because he was pitiful. That was what life meant for him now.

He wandered back aimlessly to his own garden, and took a seat on a low wooden bench under a gaunt, wind-beaten elm-tree, set in the thickness of the straggling hawthorn hedge.

He might have been wiser to go indoors. It was a beautiful evening, as even he could feel. The song of birds had ceased, but the soft murmur of waves on the beach came through the still air. The fresh breath of the sea and gorse and hawthorn scents from the common beyond the low sea-wall, the smell of young grass and freshly turned earth here in his own garden, striking on his sharpened sense, seemed to give him a heightened consciousness of the beauty from which he was for ever barred, and to touch him, as he had rarely been touched in his life before, with the vague, haunting melancholy of the spring.

It might be well for him to leave Combe Carey; he had got from it all the good it could do him. These long, solitary summer evenings spent on the beach, the cliffs, or in his own garden were a mistake. It had been better in the cold weather, when with barred windows and the snapping warmth of a fire he could busy himself with some of the handicrafts the kindness of his friends had suggested or procured for him; in typing or trying to read his new Braille library. But he could not seek those occupations now. It was impossible to spend these long, light evenings indoors. These long, light evenings! He threw his head back against the rough bark of the tree behind him with the grim mockery of a smile. Was that what he had ever called them? Oh, God! As if any day or part of a day, could be long that was *light!*

The sound of voices broke in on his ear, the catch of a gate clicked. Scout sat erect with a subdued, rumbling growl. Along the cliff path that ran behind the hawthorn hedge he heard the sound of light footsteps, girls' voices and laughter, a swish of feminine skirts. Myles's communication of the morning

recurred to his mind. These must be his new neighbours, come out for an after-dinner stroll as he had done, to survey their new domain and have a look at the sea. He remembered now there was a moon, but he supposed that he himself was not visible, for they suddenly paused a few paces from him, so near that he could not possibly help hearing their conversation.

He decided to retain his position. When they began to talk confidences it would be time enough to move. A snatch of feminine chatter would be a not unwelcome break on the grinding monotony of his own thoughts.

The first remark that broke what seemed a moment's silent contemplation of the view was impersonal enough.

"Well, here I am in the Forest of Arden"—it was a light, careless soprano voice that spoke—"'when I was at home I was in a better place: but travellers must be content.'"

"I should think they might be—here," said a second voice, softer, richer, more sympathetic. "I don't believe in your better place, Sallie. There's nothing like England, after all."

"No, but we had to travel right round the world to find that out. When you were at home you were not content."

"'The more fool I!'" the second voice continued the quotation. "Could you want anything more beautiful than that glimpse of the sea through the break in the trees—the moonlight trail on the water, and the little white sail of a boat, turning silver as it crosses it? A white sail sparkling on a blue sea"—the speaker seemed wistfully musing—"waiting to carry one off to one's Country of Dreams."

"Yes, it's pretty," her companion agreed more practically; "and I don't mean to be critical and draw comparisons. At the same time, Miggs, I do think a moonlight night is one of the things they do better abroad. When you remember that 'on such a night as this,' but with a moon which compared to the one up there was as a diamond shield to a new saucepan-lid, our eyes beheld the Colosseum, the Great Pyramid——"

"And the Taj Mahal!"

It was a curiously expressive voice, this of the second speaker; it seemed to give a meaning even to her simplest sentence. Since his blindness St. George had listened to voices with a new ear, catching novel intonations even in those most familiar to him. There was something arresting in the accents of this stranger. He listened attentively to hear her speak again.

Instead, there came a short, sharp exclamation from her companion.

"Gracious, Miggs! I've trodden on a frog!"

"Oh, poor frog!"

"I think you might say 'poor Sallie,'" suggested the other, aggrieved. "The encounter was mutually disagreeable, though certainly the unhappy impression the frog received was the more lasting."

"Is it quite dead?" asked the soft voice anxiously.

"Well, dear, I weigh something over a hundred and twenty pounds. I don't think it is necessary to hold a post-mortem. Never mind. There's one croaker less in the world. We must try and look on the bright side."

"Then come over here into the moonlight. There is a dip in the cliffs farther along where you can get the most glorious view of the sea."

"Thanks; I'm going in. I have seen the sea

frequently; and these moonlight strolls may be fun for us, but they're death to the frogs. Besides, I have heaps of unpacking still to do. And so have you."

"Have I?" The speaker's voice was dreamy. "Well, I'm not going to do it. It is a shame to be indoors on a night like this. I mean to walk a little way along the cliffs."

"Better do your unpacking. You will have plenty of opportunities for exploring the cliffs later. We have many days in Arden before us, Celia."

There was a pause.

"But you think you can be happy here, Sallie?" said the soft voice wistfully.

"Happy in Arden! Who wouldn't be—even without any Orlando or Oliver or Melancholy Jaques! Are you going? Good-bye, then, for the present, my Celia!"

"Good-bye, Sallie."

"'Nay, you must call me Rosalind!'"

With a light laugh the footsteps parted, and died away in opposite directions. For some time St. George heard nothing but the distant splash of the waves and the other barely distinguishable voices of the night. But apparently Rosalind's unpacking was not so very urgent after all—unless there were more girls in the house—for presently from the cottage windows came the sound of a piano and brief snatches of old English ballads and country dances.

The sound was not uncheerful. He stood up with an instinct to draw nearer and listen, when he heard footsteps again on the path and the soft sweep of a woman's dress against the short grass on the cliff. It was his other neighbour returning from her

moonlight stroll and singing softly to herself the words of the old ballad her friend had just played:

> "Now when she had been seven long year,
> And never her true love did see:
> 'Oh, many a tear have I shed for his sake
> When he little thought of me.'"

She was singing under her breath, but her voice was clear and sweet; he thought he would have liked to hear it at its full power. But the song ceased abruptly. He did not know if she had caught sight of him dimly behind the hedge. He fancied not, for the footsteps went on without a pause.

When they had quite died away he went back to his own house. The refrain of her song ran hauntingly in his mind—

> "Oh, many a tear have I shed for his sake
> When he little thought of me."

But he scarcely thought of the words, and attached no meaning to them.

CHAPTER III

BY CELIA'S ARBOUR

MYLES found his master a more attentive listener the next time he retailed gossip concerning the ladies next door.

The village body who did for them had, it seemed, appealed to Mrs. Ridge for practical advice concerning the kitchen stove, which refused to draw, and by long and patient cross-examination Myles had managed to elicit a few grains of information from the housekeeper on her return from the neighbouring territory.

The ladies were both Devonshire ladies, Mrs. Ridge thought. One of them, Miss Verrinder, seemed by the labels on her trunks to have travelled all over the world. Mrs. Cecil, despite the bareness of her boxes, appeared to have travelled also. They both had curiosities and photographs of foreign parts, and books!—Mrs. Ridge wouldn't have believed one could read in a year the books the ladies had brought with them, and the house only taken for three months!

"Three months!" said Harry. "I wonder what they will find to do with themselves in that time."

Whatever the neighbours found to do they were not dull. An indescribable suggestion of gaiety and life broke the sleepy, sunny calm of Arden. Across

the hawthorn hedge, from the open windows of the cottage, floated merry scraps of talk and laughter and song. Their voices sounded gaily coming up the path from the beach after their morning bathe; the cheerful rattle of cups and saucers on the lawn came pleasantly through his dreams as he lounged in a hammock chair under his own trees in the sleepy afternoons; his evenings were enlivened by their music.

Their comings and goings made life less empty for him; the dark, dull days had an edge of interest, but it was an edge that cut. Their cheerful activity brought home to him the slow stagnation of his existence. Their gaiety held something mocking and alien to his own sad humour. He shut himself away from all contact with it in a careful seclusion.

If he had been privileged to see into his neighbours' lives, not with the eyes of flesh but with an inward spiritual vision, he might have found something illusive in their cheerful animation. Sallie's chatter of inconsequent nonsense was merely a form of whistling to keep up her courage. Cecilia laughed and sang out of no gaiety of heart, but rather from a hidden, restless excitement, and alone in her room at night, looking out over the dark sea, had many moments of question and doubt.

She had carried her point triumphantly in the face of difficulties that ordinarily would have seemed to her insurmountable. She had her will and her way: what was she going to do now? From the garden and the road she caught glimpses of the sad, solitary figure of the man she had come to help, and it sometimes seemed that with the Polar ice-fields between them they could not have been farther apart. Even

in Arden a certain amount of convention ruled. Two unattached women could not easily force themselves upon a single man—even a blind man—and announce their intention of relieving the tedium of his days with their companionship. Sallie declared herself ready for such a venture, and had invented a meeting at a fictitious dinner-party in New York as an excuse for claiming his acquaintance. But Cecilia sternly discountenanced any forced encounter.

Yet her purpose held her firmly as ever. For once in her life she had been carried out of herself by one of those instant, unhesitating resolves that to a timid, undecided nature seem like the sudden working of a revealed destiny. When the difficulties looming before her dropped like magic from her path, she was inclined to see, not the effect of her own strong energy of purpose, but the operation of some outward force. She had a curious, half-superstitious feeling that, as Emmeline would say, she was "meant" to do what she was doing, that she had nothing to decide, nothing to look back upon or reconsider—she had only to keep straight forward in the way she was going and Fate would make her path plain before her.

In the second week of their stay at the cottage, Fate, it seemed, did make an effort on her behalf.

She was leaning over the gate opening on to the cliffs and she was alone. Lionel, who was spending the week-end at his brother's, had come with the latter's motor and taken Salome for a run over to Chardleigh. It was a sleepy, sunny afternoon. The little garden was bright with flowers, the bees from a neighbouring cottage garden hummed drowsily among them. Cecilia's eyes were fixed dreamily on the dark sea-line against the paler blue of the sky when she saw

St. George coming along the path over the cliffs. He walked slowly, but with a steady, assured step, scarcely seeming to need the stick he carried or the watchful companionship of Scout, who trotted beside him.

Cecilia's heart beat uncomfortably fast. Here was one of the opportunities she had desired of Fate, and her first feeling, as always when opportunity was offered her, was one of fright. They were neighbours, practically the only people in this tiny hamlet among the cliffs; it should be so easy to find some simple opening for the establishment of neighbourly relations. Any other woman in the world, she thought, could have contrived one, but in these simple feminine arts she was still, for all her enlarged experience of the world, quite unpractised. And here so much was at stake, so much hung upon any casual words she might utter. Her too keen sense of the importance of the issues of life paralysed her powers of resource. She had an insane impulse to draw back from the gate and screen herself from view behind the straggling hedge.

But the inward force that was shaping her destiny held her to her post. She waited, and watched her husband slowly draw near.

This was the first time she had really seen him clearly since the day of their marriage. He looked tall as he came along the path, and his figure was sparer than she remembered it. His face, too, was haggard and lined, and there were threads of grey among his thick, dark hair, while his eyes!—ah, his face was changed! Scarred and sightless, he could never look as he had looked before. But there was nothing revolting or horrible in the sight of him; and

if there had been, Cecilia knew she would have felt no horror—nothing but an infinite compassion. Her fingers tightened on the gate, and her voice died away beyond all possibility of speech. But it was no foolish consciousness that held her mute now; it was an inward surge of almost intolerable pity.

He reached the gate and passed it, and she could only watch him go. But in spite of herself the powers were determined to serve Cecilia now. On the gate-post beside her, a neighbour's cat, a sleek tortoise-shell, with paws demurely tucked inwards and a placid, ironic grin behind its whiskers, sat blinking sleepily in the sunshine.

Out of the tail of his eye as he went by Scout caught the hateful vision. There was a scattering rush, a spitting and swearing, a yelp and a scramble, and the cat was up the nearest tree, with Scout barking and leaping in impotent fury below.

After one brief, bewildered moment, St. George summoned his dog peremptorily, and Cecilia called softly to the cat. At the sound of her voice the man removed his hat.

"I beg your pardon," he said uncertainly. "I can't see if any one is there. I hope no harm has been done."

There was an instant's pause, and a faint tremble in the voice that answered him; but St. George thought that not unnatural. He recognized the soft, clear accents that had pleased his ear some evenings before.

"No harm—as yet. The cat had reached sanctuary in a thorn-tree. But I am afraid if you don't get your dog away there will be bloodshed. I see murder in his eye."

Harry made an instinctive movement forward,

then checked himself at the thought of blundering into a strange garden, and contented himself with a word of command in such a tone that even under the influence of the cat's infuriating grin and a mad desire to wipe out the insult in blood Scout could not disregard it. He retired reluctantly from the tree. Cecilia unfastened the gate over which he had scrambled in a blind fury, and allowed the dejected, tail-drooping culprit to pass through.

"Don't be too angry with him," she pleaded softly. "I am sure it was all the fault of the cat."

"I don't want to be harder on him than is necessary," said Harry. "Scout is my very true friend. But where cats are concerned he's a demon. At the first sight of a tail he is deaf to authority and lost to all sense of fair play—he chases them off their own doorstones! But I've never known him actually harm one yet. I don't think yours is really in danger."

"Oh, I hope not; but it isn't mine. It comes from one of the cottages along the road. It really has no more right here than your dog."

She felt as she spoke a flash of ironic consciousness that she was understating the facts. Had not St. George's dog every right to be in her garden? But this was not the moment to let her thoughts dwell on actualities. She had her part to play; she must think of something to say to fill the slight indefinite pause while St. George still stood leaning on his stick before making the movement to depart, and it rested with her to determine whether the conversation should continue on more intimate lines or drop with an exchange of formal civilities. It was with a sense of speaking in a character not her own, from some

vision of herself in St. George's mind and not her own personality, that she made her next remark in a smiling, social tone.

"I believe you and I are next-door neighbours?"

"If you are Mrs. Cecil—or Miss Verrinder," responded Harry gravely, "I believe we are."

He had recognized the speaker as Celia, the young woman who went for dreaming strolls in the moonlight while Rosalind unpacked her trunks; whether she were the maid or the widow he had no idea.

"I am Mrs. Cecil," said the soft musical voice; "and you, I think, are Mr. St. George, the explorer?"

"I was," said Harry briefly. He half regretted his words as he spoke them. It was like calling attention to the fact of his blindness and bidding for sympathy. But what was the use of ignoring his infirmity? If she had not heard of it, with the other fact concerning him, she could scarcely fail to see it now for herself. It must be plain to the most casual observer. Probably she had seen it with shrinking and disgust. Perhaps she was speaking now with her eyes carefully averted from a visage too disfigured for them to rest on with comfort. They had told him it was not necessary to wear a shade over his eyes, but to some people any scar or defect or disablement was horrible. It seemed to him that she was looking at him, whether in compassion or aversion he could not say; but when she spoke again her voice sounded light and smiling.

"My friend, Miss Verrinder, who is staying with me, says she thinks she remembers meeting you at a dinner-party in New York several years ago."

In spite of her friend's stern logic, Cecilia was weak enough to find a salve to her conscience in remember-

ing that Miss Verrinder had actually said so. She was only adopting Sallie's invention.

St. George looked thoughtful.

"Is your friend here? Anywhere within hearing?"

Cecilia laughed. "She is motoring over to Chardleigh, which is fifteen miles away, and she started half an hour ago. Even without exceeding the speed limit I think we may reckon that she is at least halfway there."

"Then," said Harry, "I may say frankly that I have no recollection of it whatever."

Cecilia laughed again. "And you are such an Irishman that you can't state a fact not flattering to a woman unless she is ten miles away! But you might have spoken just as frankly if Miss Verrinder had been here. She wouldn't have been hurt. She was quite a young girl at the time, and you were a distinguished guest—a celebrity. It was as natural that she should remember you as that you should have forgotten her."

"Miss Verrinder must indeed have been a young girl. It is something like ten years since I was in the States—the last time—the first is nearer twenty, and I didn't go to dinner-parties then—except once, as a waiter. But I never was a celebrity, either time; I think your friend must be confounding me with somebody else."

"It may be; Sallie was rather vague about it," said Cecilia hypocritically; "but it is a pity. I hoped that she might prove a connecting link." Again there flashed across her the humour of using Sallie's slight acquaintance, even had it been genuine, as a link between two people so closely bound together. She went on hurriedly: "We are such near neigh-

bours that we are certain to see a good deal of one another——"

She did not know if he noticed the confusion in which she paused and spoke quickly to relieve her, or whether he really did not perceive the mockery of her words.

"I am sorry, too, that Miss Verrinder fails us as a mutual acquaintance, if it is so necessary to have a connecting link. I suppose I never met you at any dinner-party at home or abroad?"

"Never."

"Isn't it possible that you may be the one who has forgotten?"

"I should not have forgotten." She was stooping down, stroking Scout's head. She stopped to administer a couple of gentle pats before she continued: "When I was a young girl I was exceedingly keen on foreign travel, and travellers were objects of fearful and wonderful interest to me. I never met any, and I should certainly have remembered it if I had."

"But you have travelled a little yourself since then?"

"Oh, globe-trotting. I haven't often got away from Cook and Baedeker. I have enjoyed that too," she added, with an impulse of gratitude, remembering to whom she owed her opportunities, "but it wasn't what I dreamed of when I was young—what I still think of with longing. I should like to go to the sort of places you have been to, and see all that you have seen."

"You may," said Harry, looking down, and drawing lines on the path with his stick. "And much more—that I shall never see."

There was no ignoring the meaning of his words now. She was silent for a perceptible time.

"I am sorry," she said softly, "that I said that. I didn't mean to remind you of all you have lost."

"Don't be sorry," he said; "it is good for you to remind me of all I have had." He went on hurriedly, not waiting for her to speak. "Who told you that I had travelled?"

She answered lightly, responding to his change of tone: "Rumour full of tongues! You don't suppose she would leave us alone, even in this tiny hamlet. Who told you that I had?"

"I heard you say so."

"Oh!" exclaimed Cecilia, startled, "can you hear us so plainly as that—in your house?"

"Not in my house; but there is a seat under my hedge and your path runs along behind it, and"—he smiled suddenly—"when Rosalind and Celia walk in the forest of Arden they should remember that trees have ears, and that melancholy Jaques may be skulking behind them listening to what is said."

"Oh," said Cecilia again, her thoughts flying back to past conversations. She smiled doubtfully. "I see we must be more careful."

"Ah, don't be too careful!" he exclaimed impulsively. "It is dull in the forest of Arden—for melancholy Jaques."

He did not feel her glance travel quickly and pitifully to his face, and misread the silence that followed.

"Have I offended you?" he asked bluntly. "Do you think that was too much for a stranger to say?"

"No, indeed," she answered in a low voice. She was looking at him still, at the silver threads on his temples, his face haggard and scarred, the lines of

weary patience drawn round his mouth, the pitiful blankness of his gaze. "I am sure you must know we are glad if anything can make life less dull for you. Would it be too much for a stranger to say—how sorry—" She could not trust her voice to continue.

"You are very kind." His head was bent; he was still tracing lines that he could not see in the sandy path, his voice sounded harsh and strained. "But please don't be too sorry. If you are going to let your feelings be harrowed by the sight of every blind beggar and his dog who crosses your path your walks abroad will be most unhappy ones. You see, suffering is so—so damnably common. We can none of us give ourselves any particular airs and think that we have been singled out above all other men for affliction. Suppose I have the misfortune to lose my eyesight—I am not the first."

"'*Die erste nicht!*'" exclaimed Cecilia. "Isn't that a rather Mephistophelian form of consolation? Does it make you less sorry for any one you see in pain to think that others are suffering as much—or more?"

"Yes, I think it does. At least it helps to keep my sympathies in check. If we all groan in chorus over all the suffering we know to be in the world, do we make the world a more cheerful place to live in?"

"But surely it would be less cheerful if nobody ever felt sympathy with any one else. Doesn't it make life less hard and sorrowful if we try to bear one another's burdens?"

"You can't!" he said abruptly. "We all bear what we have to bear—alone. We have to find strength to endure in ourselves or nowhere. Nothing outside can help us."

Cecilia was silent. With her cheek resting on her hand she looked with blank, unseeing eyes at the path winding upwards in the sunshine, the deep reds and the sunny greens of the cliffs, and the blue sea beyond. Her face was sad, and a shadow lay cold at her heart. Sallie was right after all. She could do no good. It was presumption on her part ever to have thought that she might.

She was startled by hearing her husband's voice, softened with compunction.

"That was a rude, ungracious thing to say in the face of your kindness. I'm sorry."

She turned to him with a smile, glad that he could not see, and would never suspect, the tears in her eyes.

"It sounded ugly because it was the truth," she said, more unsteadily than she wished to speak. "It is only lies that sound pleasant and pretty."

"It wasn't even the truth. Sympathy and kindness do help to make life more tolerable to the worst sufferer. Only it seems a pity for you, who are well and strong, and whose lives might be bright, to have them clouded by the shadow of others' griefs. To be soft and sympathetic is a mistake for your own happiness. The only heart to go comfortably through the world with is a heart like a piece of leather. Yes," he repeated reflectively, "even stone breaks—there's nothing like leather. But if you can't bring your heart to that consistency—if you will be sorry for the sick and sad, and pity the misfortunes of people who are nothing to you——"

"We do it at our own risk," she said, standing up, and shutting the gate with a click, "and the sick and sad will resent our sympathy as an impertinence, and throw back our pity in our faces!"

"No, no!" he exclaimed impetuously. "I must have spoken like an ungrateful brute to let you imagine I could feel like that! It would be impossible. For we unfortunates, who have got caught in the machinery of the gods, and have had the pride of our strength crushed out of us, and are left in the world only as a blot and an eyesore, whether we like it or not have to make some claim on you who are whole and well. We have to ask something of you—even if it is only to endure the sight of us, and to bear to have us near you. It matters to any one of us, however indifferent we may pretend to be, whether you give us that toleration and forbearance because you have to—or with sympathy and kindness——"

He broke off abruptly, murmured some vague words of farewell, and moved away.

"It was better for us not to stand upon the order of our going, Scout," he said, as they together went up the garden path. "Heaven only knows what sort of a fool we should have made of ourselves if we had stayed."

He sat down on the wooden bench in the porch, and leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, took the dog's ears and held his face between his hands.

"Would you have done that, Scout? If the wheels of life had gone over you, would you have run whining after the first petticoat you saw, holding up your paw for sympathy? I believe you would, but you're only a dog—and a mongrel at that. If you were one of the noble beasts called men don't you think you would have more pride? What's that you say, old chap? She was sorry for us. Bless the dear, pitiful heart of woman, I believe she was! But so was little Biddy sorry for us, and we ran away from her pity—which

seems to show there is something demoralizing in the air of Arden. We didn't know it by that name when we were alone here together, did we, boy? But then there was no Rosalind here, and no Celia. . . . Celia. . . . That was Celia. Well, what's the odds, as long as you're not going to play Orlando? Celia's as good as Rosalind to melancholy Jaques. Better, perhaps. She was a pert, forward minx, that Rosalind, with her saucy tongue and her 'coming-on' disposition. What's that, Scout? Celia went out of her way to be kind? She did; but I suppose you are not cur enough to misunderstand her kindness? Don't you recognize divine compassion when you see it—hear it, I mean—in a voice that would melt the frozen heart of a glacier? Don't you see, you poor fool, that we're not a man to any woman any more—we're just a blind beggar by the roadside. We don't bind a placard over our poor, silly, broken heart, and hold out our hand for alms; but we beg just the same—our infirmities cry out for us—and kindly people chuck us a ha'penny as they go by. Are we grateful for their ha'pence, Scout? I think so. At least, we'll try to be. You wouldn't snap at the hand that patted you, even though it hurt you a bit, would you, old chap? Not if you walked on two legs instead of four, and hadn't even a stump of a tail to wag to show you took things as they were meant? Yes, we must be grateful for kindness, Scout; it's all that's left us."

He dropped the dog's head, and sat for a long time silent, with his chin on his clenched fist. Scout looked up at him wistfully. This was one of his master's dark moments; it was not a time for any expression of sympathy. Only when a restless movement

showed the spell was breaking, he sidled close, and timidly licked the hand that hung down. The clenched fingers relaxed. His muzzle was clasped for a moment and shaken backwards and forwards with an affectionate squeeze.

"Bless you, Scoutie! You're the best comforter a man can want. You're the only one whose sympathy never hurts. As long as I've got you I don't want any one else. You're better than a friend, or a brother, or a wife."

CHAPTER IV

"SAMSON AGONISTES"

MRS. RIDGE, St. George's housekeeper, was a little, spare woman of bony frame, with a shrewd, freckled face, sun-bleached flaxen hair strained tightly back from a capable brow, and light grey eyes of direct and piercing vision. She was something over forty years of age, and had, in the lugubrious phrase of her class, buried two husbands. Though no beauty, as Myles sarcastically observed to his master, she was cheerfully convinced in her own mind that there were numbers of men in the world who would be quite content to be buried as her third for the sake of the exceedingly comfortable time she could give them while they lived. She was accustomed to speak of her two lost mates with pity, as of those who had exchanged the solid blessing of domestic life under her capable management for the dubious bliss of a future state. She could not quite believe that either her John or her Thomas would find the angels so regardful of his tastes and well-being as herself, or any happiness on the other side of the grave equal to the joy inspired by her own good cooking.

She first made the acquaintance of Sallie and Cecilia over the kitchen stove. She had seen at a

glance where the mischief lay—where was the kitchen stove that in the secret and intricate blackness of its heart could baffle Eliza Ridge? But in the meantime, that the ladies should not, in the enforced suspension of culinary operations, "live on tin," as Miss Verrinder said, she brought over supplementary supplies of her own making.

Cecilia regarded the housekeeper's offerings with some scruple; but, considering, as she said to Sallie, the camels of her husband's providing which she had already swallowed, a chicken pie supplied from his kitchen seemed a gnat to strain at.

Salome entirely agreed. Indeed, apart from the material advantage of Mrs. Ridge's friendship, and the excellence of the pie, she was inclined to see in the defective kitchener a direct instrument of Providence. Neighbourly relations with the household next door being slow to establish themselves, she perceived the expediency of exploiting St. George's housekeeper. It was better, she thought, though she did not expound this theory to Cecilia, that friendly intercourse should begin at the back door than not at all.

Mrs. Ridge responded to the flattering appeals for help with a certain dry satisfaction. It would be too much to say she was flattered. She frankly recognized herself as necessary to the situation; but she was not vain—any more than Chatham was vain when he made his famous speech. He knew that he could save his country and that no one else could, and he said so. Mrs. Ridge knew that she was a woman equal to any domestic emergency and the village body was not. Very well, then!

In all the homely arts of life, but especially in the

she fell into a dream, with her head thrown back against the brick frame of the window, watching the sunshine falling warm and bright on the golden and velvet-brown wallflowers that bordered the mossy, flagged path, on the flower-bed in the centre of the little grass-plot, a sheet of blue forget-me-nots, on a row of tawny, old-fashioned bee-skeps in their neighbour's garden, just visible through the trees. These things were a constant joy to her eyes. How often, in weariness and depression of mind, had the tint of cloud and sky, the deep harmonies of foliage, the glow of green against the blue, lifted and lightened her mood! Could anybody ever get used to a world without colour and sunshine?

She was roused by the sound of her own name.

"Now, there's Mrs. Cecil, she's had a man of her own. She knows what the men-folk are about their dinner."

Cecilia carefully avoided Sallie's eye.

"My husband's dinners," she said, smiling, but with a tinge of colour in her cheek, "never gave me a moment's uneasiness, Mrs. Ridge."

"Then they did him, I expect, ma'am," rejoined the downright housekeeper; "hours, more likely. I beg your pardon," she added, as Cecilia turned away quickly and Salome's expression became one of marked gravity; "but I've heard young wives make that remark before, and I could never help feeling sorry for their husbands. I wouldn't like to say anything to hurt your feelings, ma'am," she went on, fixing the young wife with an eye of some sternness, "for what's done's done, but, who knows? if you'd given more thought you might have had him with you still——"

"You don't hurt my feelings," said Cecilia. "I know you only mean it in kindness; but really nothing I could do in that way would have made any difference."

"You know best, ma'am, of course," said Mrs. Ridge, with a cough of dry unconviction.

"If I ever marry," Salome struck in rather hurriedly, "I shall move heaven and earth to get you to come and cook for me, Mrs. Ridge. Then I shall feel sure that my domestic happiness is built upon a rock that nothing can shake."

"Well, miss, if you can't cook yourself, you're wise to get some one in the house that can, for it's ill living with a man that isn't properly fed. Not that you're safe from his tempers and tantrums though you give him the best of the land to eat. If a man's built to grumble he'll always find something to grumble at. They don't know much about married life that think because you feed a man well you're always going to have him contented."

Salome turned to her friend. "Mrs. Ridge," she said, with a little twist of her eyebrows, "in her views of matrimony exactly voices my own sentiments. But it is depressing, somehow, to listen to my own wisdom from the lips of others. I wish there wasn't so much truth in her words."

"But in this case should we not consider Mrs. Ridge's actions rather than her words?" suggested Cecilia slyly. "After all, she has tried matrimony twice."

Mrs. Ridge allowed a dry smile to escape her. "Well, young ladies, I'll leave you with that word to cheer you. It's not my business to warn you against a thing that Providence has ordained. Maybe I'm

a little inclined to say too much just now, for that Myles is so full of the notion that every woman is dying to be married that I have to keep pointing out the drawbacks to him to keep him sensible, and I must say it has opened my eyes to some I hadn't thought of before. At all events, there's this to comfort you, that if married life has its trials the single state isn't free from them. Good morning, ma'am, good morning, miss. I'll leave the pie-dish, and you can let me have it back when you have done with it."

A few days later it was Cecilia's mission to go round to the next house and apologize for the pie-dish, which had sustained an incurable fracture.

It was not without some demur that she undertook the errand. She did not like venturing uninvited into her husband's domain, though the chances that he would meet her, or even hear of her visit, were very remote. Sallie, however, was obdurate in her insistence on it. It was a pie-dish, Mrs. Ridge had said, she set special store by; it was only decent to go in person to express regret for its destruction. Her own time was precious. It was a rainy morning, and wet weather was always propitious to the flames of genius. Owing to a long spell of golden days she had idled shamefully; but with a steady downpour from a lowering sky inspiration was simply spurting up. Nobody calling herself a friend would try to divert such a flow of ideas. Besides, it was Cecilia who had broken the pie-dish.

It was raining still, but not violently, as Cecilia turned into her husband's garden. The sweetbrier-bush by the gate scattered a shower of raindrops over her as she brushed past it; there were little pools in

the hollows of the mossy lawn, and rivulets running down the ruts in the drive. St. George evidently troubled little about the condition of his premises. The whole place had a neglected air. Cecilia had never seen the house closely before, and she observed it with interest. It was a long rambling building of one story, with a deep thatched roof, rough-cast walls, and faded green venetian shutters to the windows. Before the door was a wide, roomy latticed porch, overgrown with climbing roses.

Here, on her return from the interview with the housekeeper, she saw the master of the house, sitting at a small table covered with books and papers, laboriously spelling out, it seemed, some document with his fingers. She stood still for a moment and looked at him. His patient concentration on his task touched some deeper fibre of pity in her than if she had seen him lost in sombre brooding. The appeal of his helplessness drew her hesitating footsteps towards him.

She thought she walked very softly, but his quick ears caught the sound of her tread upon the moist ground. He raised his head and looked towards the spot where she stood. There was no escape now. She set her teeth and pitched her voice to a note of cheerful friendliness as she wished him good morning.

He pushed back his papers and stood up.

"Mrs. Cecil!"

Cecilia came forward.

"I'm not trespassing," she said, smiling, "though I have been to the house to confess something worse than a trespass. I don't suppose Mrs. Ridge will ever tell you of it, so I will."

Now that they stood face to face and she saw how worn and lonely he looked, the pity that gripped her

heart drove out every other feeling but the womanly desire to cheer and brighten. She told him the story of their difficulties in housekeeping, Mrs. Ridge's benefactions, and the disaster to the pie-dish, with a graphic humour which amused him. His sightlessness gave her courage. She felt no self-consciousness. She was not Cecilia, she was Mrs. Cecil. And yet, at the back of her mind all the time lurked the memory of their actual relationship to each other, and the thought how, if they had been real husband and real wife, she might in the same way have been telling him of some small domestic catastrophe in their common life.

"So that is the history of the affair," she concluded, "and I hope if you are going to be angry you will be angry with me, and not with Mrs. Ridge."

"My dear lady, I am delighted that Mrs. Ridge was able to help you. Please continue to make use of her in any way you like, and smash every bit of crockery in my pantry if you care to."

"That is a tempting offer," said Cecilia, laughing. "Are you always so recklessly generous in giving away what belongs to you?"

"I don't call it generosity to give away what you don't want."

"But what you do not want to-day you may want badly to-morrow. A wise man would consider that."

"I am afraid I was never very strong in the wisdom that considers to-morrow, and I don't think it would have done me much good if I had been. The future never turns out as we expect it to, so where's the use of worrying?"

"Have you always acted on that principle? It doesn't seem to me a very safe one," said Cecilia,

with a curious little smile. "Not that you are in any danger this time. I am not going to play the *Poltergeist* in your kitchen. But really you would have only your own rashness to blame if I had something much worse to confess than a broken pie-dish."

He laughed as she did, without the remotest inkling of the thought that was in her mind. He felt she was making talk in simple kind neighbourliness. Perhaps she had thought, as she went by, that he looked lonely and dejected, and was throwing a halfpenny to the poor blind man. Well, a blind man couldn't afford to despise halfpence. He would have liked her to stay and talk to him. But at that moment a gust of wind swept through the trees, shaking down raindrops and fluttering the papers on the table.

"I'm afraid I am keeping you in the rain," he said apologetically. "It is my painful duty to tell you that you oughtn't to stand there any longer."

Cecilia put back her umbrella. "It is scarcely raining at all now. But the wind is strong. It has blown one of your papers off the table."

She went after a sheet that was travelling towards a puddle on the lawn, and brought it back to him. He put out his hand to take it and caught her hand instead. There was a touch of colour in her cheeks as she drew it rather hurriedly away.

"There is a little mud on the corner here. Let me wipe it for you. And then it might be safer if we put a book on it." She took up a volume from the loaded table. "You have plenty of reading matter here."

"Yes," St. George agreed rather listlessly, leaning against the wall. "My people have been very good. They have provided me with all the latest and best

aids to the blind. I have a typewriter to write my letters with, and books specially printed for the likes of me to read. But I've nothing to write to my friends that would particularly interest them to hear, and as for the books, I'm afraid I haven't taken very kindly yet to the process of reading with my fingers. I liked to see the old familiar words leap to the eye. The very look of them on the page was half the charm of reading."

"You are like Elia. Do you remember it was one of his objections to a future state that knowledge would probably come to him by 'some awkward experiment of intuition,' instead of the familiar process of reading?"

"No, I didn't remember that. I never read Elia very much. He was too much in love with streets. I always hated them—at least, too much of them. They made me want to get somewhere where I could stretch myself and breathe, and get a glimpse of the world as God made it."

"Yes, I know that feeling; I've had it, too. It used to seem as if I were in prison, and I should die if I couldn't get outside and breathe the free air. If I had been a boy, I should probably have run away to sea. As it was, I stayed at home and read books of travel."

"Do you care for reading of other people's travels?"

Cecilia's mind flashed a sudden recollection of a question put to a shy, awkward girl from the suburbs, years ago. Would he remember the taste she had confessed to then? Would his suspicions be aroused? Surely not; he must have long since forgotten every detail of that interview. Certainly there was no sign of awakening recognition in his look or manner.

"There is an article here in a paper I've had sent me; I was waiting for my man to read it to me. My sister-in-law tells me it gives some account of the latest Antarctic expedition—Molyneux's. Are you interested at all in Polar exploration?"

"At one time I was—very much."

"This seems to be an account from a man who went with them, and saw them settled in their winter quarters. I don't know if there's anything in it. My sister thought I might care to have it. I—I was interested in Molyneux's expedition."

"I should like to see it very much. But you say you haven't heard it yet. Would you care for me to read it to you?"

She was proud of the matter-of-fact calmness with which she put the question.

"Oh, would it bother you dreadfully?" he said, with an eager simplicity which touched her. "My man Myles is a person of education; he doesn't mispronounce more than half his words; but his style of reading is elocutionary. He tries to put expression even into a newspaper article, and his idea and mine of the right expression don't always agree. Besides, he's a Londoner, and the cockney accent always grates on my Irish ear."

"Well, I'm a Londoner, too," said Cecilia, laughing. "But I will read a little, and you can stop me if it jars on you."

"You'll sit down." He felt with a subdued eagerness of hospitality along the wooden bench. "I believe it's dry. But perhaps"—with sudden anxiety—"you are wet. You have been standing in the rain."

"No, indeed, I'm not. I have a coat on."

"But is it a thick one?" He put out his hand and took a fold of the sleeve between his fingers, with a matter-of-fact assumption of the privilege of the blind who must feel when they cannot see. Apparently his touch satisfied him. He sat down on the opposite bench, and thoughtfully stroked his dog's head while Cecilia read.

There was certainly no particular occasion for elocution in the simple statement of the exploring party's position and plans for the future, but she had hard work to keep her voice to an expressionless businesslike level. This was the beginning of her mission. She was doing something to comfort and help at last—to pay off some of her debt to her husband. She stole a glance at him between the paragraphs. He was hanging on her words, intent and interested. The triumph of her success kindled and inspired her. She was ready with a question when the reading ceased, and he answered with a quick response to her sympathy and intelligence. The knowledge she had gained of Polar literature during those months when she had believed her husband within the Antarctic Circle—knowledge gained in hours of stealthy study, where, ashamed of her own interest, she had hidden the books like a criminal from Sallie's searching gaze—stood her in good stead now. Finding she understood his references, and could corroborate his facts, Harry plunged into a discussion of the subject. The story of a previous expedition was on the table; she must turn up the book and settle a doubtful question. The information was not there—then it must be in So-and-so's account —he had the book in his study, Myles would go and fetch it. But while his attendant disappeared in

search of the volume St. George seemed suddenly to realize to what extent he was engrossing her.

"I've no right to keep you here like this," he said ruefully. "By Jove! I've hurried you on from one thing to another; I haven't given you a chance to get away—like a little brat who is going to be left in the dark, and invents excuse after excuse to keep the nurse and the candle with him. Oh, I didn't mean that—I hope," as she made no response, "you don't think I had my peculiar circumstances in my mind. I don't want to be always bringing forward my—my misfortune, and appealing to your sympathy. But somehow this thing that has tumbled down my life seems to block every conversational path. I can't talk to any one for five minutes but we get tripped up over it." Still she was silent, and a faint shadow crossed his face. "I really must ask you to forgive me if I have spoken too much of my affairs," he said, drawing back with a little chill of reserve.

"Mr. St. George," said Cecilia suddenly, "I can't tell you how glad I should be if it were in my power to do anything that would make even a candle-light in your darkness. As we are likely to be neighbours for the next month or so, I should like to act a neighbour's part. If I can help you in any way—if you care to hear me read, or would like any business letter written—you might remember that I am always next door."

She spoke a little breathlessly, and watched his face with anxiety.

"You are very kind," he said gravely. "But why should you trouble?"

"It would be no trouble," she responded quickly. "The kindness would be yours if you would let me

help you." She saw a faint look of perplexity cross his face. "Oh, you don't understand," she said impulsively; "you won't know; I must tell you. Some time ago some one who—who was very near to me lost their sight, and circumstances were so that it was not in my power, or I thought it was not, to help them as I wanted to do. Since then I have always longed to do something for some one who was blind. Indeed, I don't mean it as an empty form when I tell you that you could give me no greater pleasure than to let me help you in any way I can, however small, for—for the sake of—that other!"

Her face was averted as she spoke; she could not face his sightless eyes. She plucked nervously at the leaves of a climbing rose-branch. But through all her agitation she held rigid control over her voice. She could not help it that here and there in her speech it faltered and fell; but she kept the tone of it soft and clear. She would not let it drop into the old huskiness of shyness that might strike a chord of memory and reveal to St. George from whom this offer of help came.

He was far from suspecting it. The explanation of her kindness and interest was to him not unnatural. He drew his own conclusions from the incorrect ambiguity of the pronoun she employed, and put down her evident emotion as a tribute to some other man—a cousin, perhaps, with whom she had grown up from childhood, to whom her selfish beast of a husband had refused to let her devote herself. But for the kindness of her intention towards himself he was touched and grateful.

He held out his hand impulsively across the table, and as she put hers into it, gripped it fast, frankly, and without sentiment.

"My dear Mrs. Cecil, I can't look into your face and see if you read my thought. You must let me converse with you as a blind man can. This is scarcely a case for thanks and protestations. I should be blind in heart and mind if I didn't see all that your offer means. If it is your real wish that we should be neighbours—that is, that you should play the Good Samaritan to a man stripped of every means of repaying you—I agree, and bless you for the thought."

He laid her hand gently on the table and went on in a more ordinary tone:

"I don't think I was quite cut out for an Alexander Selkirk. I came down to this place to be alone; but already I'm beginning to think that the charms of solitude have been over-rated. At least I am not so much in love with the sound of my own voice that I care to hear no other. I've wanted somebody to talk to badly these last two days. It's been dull listening to nothing but the rain beating against my windows or dripping from the eaves." Scout, with his nose against his master's knee, was following with large, humid eyes of love the sound of that dear voice speaking. Did he hear any treachery in his master's words; did he remember some one who wanted no other friend as long as he had his dog, and ponder sadly over the fickle favour of man? "It is something," the traitor continued, "to have a voice 'singing beside you in the wilderness.' I mean that quite literally," he added quickly. "Your music has been the greatest pleasure to me. You sing the old Irish ballads that my mother used to sing to me when I was a boy—some that I've never heard since. It gave me a queer feeling to hear them. One of my

earliest recollections as a little chap is of sitting up in bed and listening to my mother singing *Oft in the Stilly Night.* You sang it the other evening, you know."

"Yes," murmured Cecilia. She did not say that the copy from which she had sung it was signed "Henrietta St. George."

"Your voice makes me think a little of my mother's, when you sing," he went on meditatively, "if I can trust my early recollections."

"I am glad if it doesn't jar on you quite as much as Myles's," said Cecilia, with a smile, as she took up her book from the table. "Shall we go back to the Arctic Circle?"

The old shyness, the unconquerable instinct of withdrawal, the impulse to refuse a thing she wanted just because she wanted it, prompted the chilling suggestion. But St. George was not chilled by it. He never thought of taking her words in any but their literal sense, and in that sense he answered them, with a mixture of eagerness and hesitation. "Your reading is much too good to waste on a mere traveller's log. Even Myles couldn't work much havoc with a record of weather, and housing of stores, and the eightieth parallel. But if you are really sure that your voice won't be tired, and you wouldn't mind—there is a book here—I got Myles to buy it in Wyemouth, and meant him to read something to me, but he would make such a terrible hash of it." He felt with a quick, discerning touch among the papers on the table, and unearthed a volume in the blue and gold of a popular edition of classics.

"*Paradise Lost?*" questioned Cecilia, with a note of wonder, taking it from him.

"No, the *Samson Agonistes*, if you don't mind. Perhaps you think it is a morbid taste to indulge, but there's a kind of interest in learning what a man who's had the same misfortune as yourself feels about the thing. I have never cared much for Milton; I don't think I've read a line of his since I had to write him out as an imposition at school. As a matter of taste I'd give all he ever wrote for a single one of Shakespeare's plays. But when I was going over *Lear* the other day—I have him in Braille—it occurred to me that Milton on his blindness might be interesting. You are sure you don't mind?"

"No," said Cecilia slowly. "If you can stand it, I should be able to."

But it was Harry, after all, who stood it best. He sat very still, with his chin on his hand. It was she who suffered in keeping her voice from breaking over the grand, terrible lines of anguish and despair:

"Oh, dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon."

How could he endure it? The pity and the horror of it wrung her heart. As she read she lost all consciousness of self. Her natural gift of dramatic expression, for once not paralysed by nervousness, helped her to give its full depth and meaning to the tragedy. The man, doomed himself to perpetual darkness, listened spellbound to this drama of blindness, with his face set like a rock.

The interest quickened painfully for Cecilia with the appearance of the false wife, Dalila. Her words of specious penitence seemed to put into form her own *apologia*. So would she have declared to her husband, if she had dared, her past regret for the wrong of her marriage, her present excuse.

"But conjugal affection,
Prevailing over fear and timorous doubt,
Hath led me on, desirous to behold
Once more thy face, and know of thy estate,
If aught in my ability may serve
To lighten what thou suffer'st and appease
Thy mind with what amends is in my power,
Though late, yet in some part to recompense
My rash, but more unfortunate, misdeed."

At the last line her self-control gave way.

"I can't go on," she said, steadying her voice with difficulty; "my throat aches."

"I am a thoughtless brute!" exclaimed St. George, starting to his feet. "I should have stopped you pages ago, but you simply carried me on. It would be waste of time for me to say pretty things to you about your reading; you must know what it is. Will you ever be able to forgive me, and let me hear it again?"

"I will finish the rest another day," she said, rising and closing the book. "I must go home now."

He walked to the door of the porch and put out his hand.

"It isn't raining now?"

"Oh, no; it stopped some time ago. Since I have been here there has even been an occasional gleam of sunshine."

"I thought I felt it," said Harry.

He walked with her down the garden to the small gate by which she had entered, which opened a yard or two from that of the cottage. The rusty hinge groaned as he put it back for her to pass through, and the sweetbrier-bush scattered a shower of drops on his uncovered head. "I must have that thing pruned," he said.

On the cliff path the wind blew fresh and strong.

"By the 'white horses' out at sea," observed Cecilia, "you might think there would be some splendid waves; but this is rather a tame stretch of beach."

"You would probably see a fine sea on the rocks round the corner of the headland there. Why don't you go and have a look? It wouldn't take you five minutes."

It took a very long five minutes, and it was longer still before Cecilia, having found the sea she wanted, could tear herself away from the sight of it. St. George stood beside her, listening to the break and dash of the waves, and the breeze that ruffled his hair floated the end of her veil across his face.

The clouds still hung grey and lowering over a grey sea, only brightened by an occasional gleam of stormy sunshine. But Cecilia found nothing dreary and hopeless in the prospect. On the contrary, there was a vague stir of excitement, of promise, in the voice of the waves, the fresh, strong breeze that wrapped her round, the glint of pale sunshine on the face of the cliff. All her life she remembered the walk back along the moist, red path, the fresh emerald of the drenched grass, the smell of the gorse, the cry of the seagulls.

"Then you will not forget that we are neighbours," she said, pausing with her hand on her own gate; "and if as a neighbour you care to come and visit us, my friend and I will always be pleased to see you. You might, perhaps, come and have tea with us this afternoon, if it rains."

"Mayn't I come if it doesn't rain?"

"Certainly, if you have nothing better to do."

"I shan't have that," said Harry gravely. "I will come with the greatest pleasure, if you are sure" —he hesitated for a moment—"that your friend won't mind."

"Sallie? No, indeed. Why should she?"

The man's hand was resting on the gate. She saw it tighten its grip till the knuckles stood out white. "You see," he said in a low voice, "I didn't know that perhaps I wasn't an unpleasant sight—the kind of object that people would rather not have near them. You seem able to stand it, but perhaps you have had to accustom yourself to a similar sight, and it would make your friend ill to look at me. I'd sooner drag out my days on a desert island than have that effect on any one."

"But, indeed, you never would," protested Cecilia earnestly. "No one would look at you and feel anything but—but pity."

"You might feel that, and the other, too," he persisted bluntly. "In this matter we are all the slaves of our senses. I've felt sorry for many a poor devil, and been glad enough I didn't have to eat my dinner in his company."

"But surely you know you are not—like that. They must have told you——"

"Yes, they told me. But you can tell anything to a blind man. Of course, I suppose if I had been a hopeless spectacle they would have made me wear glasses. But people have their different ideas of what is tolerable. And your own relations are anxious to spare your feelings as much as possible, and if they happen to be women—" He broke off suddenly. "Is there a woman living you could trust not to tell you a kindly lie rather than the cruel truth?"

Cecilia was silent.

"Are *you* to be trusted?" he demanded grimly, yet with the suspicion of a smile. "Would you hesitate to deceive a man—for his happiness?"

She had no answer ready. What was the whole of her life at present but the deceiving of a man for, as she hoped, his happiness.

"I should hesitate," she answered slowly, "and I should hate to do it——"

"But still you would do it?"

"In an exceptional case—yes."

He smiled.

"Oh, but this *isn't* an exceptional case!" she protested in distress. "Really I am telling the truth! Indeed, indeed, Mr. St. George, you may trust me!"

"Indeed, and I do," said Harry, and held out his hand.

CHAPTER V

NEIGHBOURS

"MRS. CECIL and I," said Sallie, "have been making friends with your cook."

"So I understand," said Harry, carefully putting down his teacup. "I hope you haven't been trying to tempt her away from me. She is a woman whose price is above rubies."

"Oh, as if I should be so base! Besides, she wouldn't come. She only lives to have her art appreciated, and a household consisting of two young ladies, as she said herself, is no field for her efforts."

Harry laughed. Miss Verrinder's conversation amused him. He was finding an enjoyment in this visit to his neighbours' cottage for which he was half inclined to deride himself.

Cecilia had already described their habitation to him. He could picture without much effort the cottage simplicity touched up artistically—the warm red brick floor, the sober brown wainscotted walls, the leaded casement windows and low, broad window-seats, the high chimney-shelf with its pewter ornaments and the settle in the corner, and—delightful incongruities—the piano, writing-table, and book-cases giving to the rustic interior a charmingly habitable air.

The day had clouded over once more, but through the open casement windows the rain seemed to fall with a gentle sound, and the scent of sweet, wet roses drifted freshly in. After his long, dark, solitary days there was something novel and not unpleasing in finding himself among women-folk again. He had never been insensible to the charm of feminine society, only jealous of its interference with the more serious interests of his life. Now that his life was bare of interests he could yield without reserve to the atmosphere, at once soothing and stimulating, that woman creates, and find pleasure in the sounds and signs of femininity in his surroundings—the rattle of teacups, the girls' clear voices, their cheerful talk, the sweep of their gowns, even the brisk tapping of their heels on the brick floor.

"Nature is so disgustingly recuperative," he moralized to himself. "She won't so much as leave you the dignity of a broken heart. A landslip tumbles you down with all you ever hoped or cared for—and you are not even left to enjoy a grand and solitary desolation. Trumpery little aims and interests crop up impertinently among the ruins, and soon you are an ordinary, grass-grown feature of the landscape, and children play and girls gather flowers about you. You thought, poor fool, you might be like Samson and pull down the House of Life about your ears because you could no longer find enjoyment there; and here you are, quite pleased and patting yourself on the back because you can manage your cake and teacup like other people, and these young women treat you as if you were an ordinary man."

"Mrs. Ridge enjoys a position that is unassailable," Salome went on. "I don't think she ever felt jealous

of any other woman in her life. Her second husband —she has had two, you know, and is certain to have a third, and will probably have no difficulty in securing a fourth, if life holds out—was eight years younger than herself, and quite handsome, with an eye for beauty in others; but Mrs. Ridge, who isn't the least good-looking, never seems to have suffered a moment's uneasiness. 'My Tom knew the comfort of his home, and that he could reckon on a dinner every day that a king needn't grumble at—and he wasn't going to risk that for a pair of bright eyes.' I ventured to point out to her that men had imperilled their immortal souls for nothing more; but she said that was different. I wish I could tell you what a slight thing in comparison she made it sound. Now, Mr. St. George, how do you like that picture of your sex as seen by a woman of experience?"

"My dear Miss Verrinder, no man alive could hold up his head under the opinion any woman of experience has of his sex if he wasn't shown by example every day the greatness of your charity towards the sinners. You see, for all her insight into our weaknesses, Mrs. Ridge has taken two husbands, and she remembers them both with affection."

Sallie nodded. "That is so. She was speaking almost with tears in her eyes the other day of her first and his early death. It is true her principal regret seemed to be that he died before she had learned to cook for him as she has learned since. 'Ah, miss, if I'd only known then what I know now! I could often cry to think, now it's too late, how much tastier I could have made his stews, for instance, if I'd only thought at the time to put a wipe of garlic round the saucepan!' She felt that even in the heavenly man-

sions her John was the poorer for the lack of that wipe of garlic, and she suffered both as a wife and an artist. I sympathized with her."

Harry laughed at Salome's story. "Is it true, then, as I hear, that you are an artist?" he asked.

"I do a little—in black and white," she answered hurriedly. "How did you hear that?"

"From my man Myles, who has taken all knowledge that doesn't concern him to be his province. I believe he wrung the intelligence from Mrs. Ridge—with great difficulty, I'm sure. She is no gossip, but Myles is insatiable and irrepressible. I must beg you to tell nothing to my housekeeper or your own servant that you don't wish to reach my ears, for I have all the news of the neighbourhood poured into them every morning when he is shaving me and has me at his mercy. I can't help knowing all about you."

"Then it is just as well," said Sallie, her eyes twinkling, "that we have no secrets to hide."

Cecilia got up and walked to the window, thrusting it back so that the rosebush growing against the wall shook down a shower of petals and raindrops, and the fresh scent of rain-wet flowers stole into the room. A thrush sang sweetly from among the darkly moist branches of a straggling elm-tree that guarded the cottage, and from the distance came the faint call of the cuckoo.

"Hear the cynic!" said Salome. "In the spring its note stirs our blood with all the beauty and promise of life, and turns the young fancy to thoughts of love. And at the end of June, as if it belonged to the Mrs. Ridge school of philosophy, it just cries 'Cook!' and flies away!"

St. George joined Cecilia at the window.

"By Jove, it smells good!" he said, drawing in a deep breath of the fresh, washed air. "You seem to have a rose-garden here. When I remember the place it was nothing but bean-poles and cabbage-stalks."

"Yes, there are roses—old-fashioned country cabbage-roses, whose scent is so much sweeter than the more cultivated kinds. They have such an air of being at home in the garden that I think they must really have been here before; but you did not notice them in among the bean-poles."

"That's possible," he said, with a little smile. "I suspect there were a good many things I didn't notice when I could see. Are you going to point the obvious moral that it is sometimes given to a blind man to find roses in the world where a man with his eyesight finds only bare sticks?"

"No," said Cecilia. "I'm not going to preach cheap philosophy to you or point obvious morals. I should prefer to describe to you how sweet our rose-garden looks now that the rain has stopped and the sun has broken through the clouds, and there are long shadows on the wet grass, and golden reflections in the little pools the rain has made in the hollows of the flagged pathway. I wish I could make you see it all as I do."

Salome was at the writing-table at the far end of the room finishing a letter for the milk-boy to carry into Lulworth. Harry and Cecilia had the window to themselves.

"Thank you," he said. "It's good of you to give me a glimpse of your world. Some people seem to think it a cruelty even to mention the sun to us who are in the dark. I don't know how it may be with

others, but it doesn't really make me happier to think of the world as black to every one as it is to me. I like to be made to feel the beauty of a spring day and summer rain. I can feel these things though I can't see them. I have memory and imagination still. The world isn't quite a blank because the light has gone out. I can always be thankful that I wasn't born blind, and that I used my eyes while I had them."

He was silent a minute, leaning against the window-frame with his hands in his pockets in his old unconventional attitude, and when he spoke again it was as if he felt himself alone, and was following out loud his own inward thought.

"'Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun. But if a man live many years and rejoice in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many.'"

He turned to Cecilia with a sudden smile.

"I got Myles to borrow a Bible from Mrs. Ridge and read me that. Poor fellow, I could almost hear his jaws drop when I asked for it, and he wasn't quite at his ease with me for days afterwards. He evidently thought things must be in a bad way with me if I was taking to studying the Scriptures."

"I have heard a good deal of your man Myles from Mrs. Ridge," said Cecilia, after a minute. "He doesn't seem to be a favourite of hers."

"Oh, they have each too good an opinion of themselves to altogether approve of the other; but they get along very well. Indeed, we're quite a harmonious household. I couldn't be better served. With Mrs. Ridge to attend to my inner, and Myles my outer man, I've nothing to wish for. As regards

my personal appearance I've not been so well looked after since I left the nursery. My brother sees to my wardrobe now, and his sense of fitness would never permit me to wear anything that wasn't just right. Myles, too, is a tremendous stickler for the correct thing. I believe he would feel himself disgraced if my tie didn't match my socks."

Cecilia smiled in outward response. She had already noticed that her husband's hair was more smoothly brushed, and the details of his dress more carefully arranged than she had ever seen them. But his tie did not match his socks.

The trifling discrepancy gave her a little throb of pity quite out of proportion to her usual sympathy with masculine vanities. She knew that St. George did not really care a straw about the colour of his socks; that Myles, though he apparently professed a zeal for his master's correct appearance he did not always show, was in all essentials honest and trustworthy. But it brought home to her the peculiar helplessness of the blind, subject to small neglects and deceptions even from those who loved them best and served them most faithfully; so liable to blunder, and not even able to know that they had blundered or been deceived.

"It's all so heart-breaking," she said to Salome, sitting in the window when the visitor was gone. "I don't know whether it is the awful great things or the pitiful little ones that make me feel worse."

"The whole thing is tragic," Sallie agreed with feeling. "But, Miggs darling, we mustn't take it too tragically. We shan't do any good to Mr. St. George that way. You *can't* agonize in sympathy with people if you want to help them."

"I know," said Cecilia. "And haven't I laughed with Harry a dozen times to-day when I could more easily have cried? And haven't I gone out of my way, and put myself forward, though it has outraged every fibre of my nature to do it? You are made so differently, you don't understand what torture it is to me! Oh, Sallie!" she put her head back against the window-frame, half laughing and half crying. "I feel brazen, brazen! Isn't my forehead of brass?"

"No, it isn't. You look a particularly dear, sweet thing. I only wish—it is a most unselfish wish, for he wouldn't let me keep you another day—that that husband of yours could see you."

"I'm very glad he can't!" exclaimed Cecilia, sitting upright. "Oh, no, I don't mean that—only I should die if he could."

"I don't see why. But as he can't, poor dear, I believe it is my duty to beguile his ears with descriptions of your beauty and catalogues of your charms."

"Please don't, Sallie!"

"Why not? You should do the same for me. You don't know what an idea of your looks—of both our looks—he may have obtained through the distorting medium of his man. I am quite sure that neither of us is of the style of beauty to please Myles. There isn't enough of the two of us put together to make one woman of the magnitude that would satisfy him."

"I don't know about that," said Cecilia, smiling; "but I hear from Mrs. Ridge that as he spoke of you as 'the fair one' his master wanted to know if I was dark, and he said not exactly: my hair was 'red-like.' "

"There! What did I tell you? Your pretty chestnut!"

"Oh, but I'm very grateful to Myles. If he makes

his master think of me as a red-headed woman I am safe from detection. Harry never saw me except in a dingy London office, and in a hat and veil. If he noticed that I had any hair at all he could only think of it as a smoky brown. I don't believe it was very bright then. It needed the sunshine I've lived in since to bring out its present dissembling colour."

Salome had not erred with regard to Mr. Myles's estimate of the charms of her friend and herself. His own taste inclined to the redundant in figure and the high-toned in colour. But he was a kindly creature on the whole, and willing, as he said, that every woman should have her chance, despite any trifling defects of form and complexion. He therefore watched with a keen and inquisitive, but not unfriendly eye, the growing intimacy between his master and the ladies at the cottage. He felt no jealousy when he was deposed as reader to the former in favour of Cecilia. Personally he preferred his own style of elocution, but he recognized that this is a world of varied tastes, and he knew he had not that inspiring interest in the subjects of his master's fancy which an artful young woman could so easily assume.

In his own mind he had no doubt of the artful young woman's intentions towards his master, and was only uncertain whether she had in her friend a rival or a supporter. But he wasn't one to interfere with any woman's attempt to catch a husband, he declared to Mrs. Ridge, whom, in spite of a blighting indifference shown in every word or look, he sometimes suspected of designs upon himself. It was a game for which Providence had designed the sex, and it was no man's business to blame them for it, only to see that they didn't catch him.

He was therefore quite agreeable that his charge should pass much of his time at the cottage; that the ladies should walk with him, talk to him, play and sing to him, spend long mornings in his company on the beach, and walk with him over the common and along the cliffs; that Miss Verrinder should play chess, and Mrs. Cecil be taught to write in Braille, and that, having somehow discovered that Mr. St. George had studied the violin in his youth, they should insist on his sending for his fiddle from town and coach him with careful accompaniments, in spite of his protestations that he was horribly out of practice, and the fact that he had lost the use of his eyes was no reason why he should make his neighbours wish they had lost the use of their ears. This preoccupation gave Myles, as he said, more time to attend to his own affairs—in other words, to diligently discuss the affairs of every one else with the unresponsive Mrs. Ridge.

CHAPTER VI

ANY CAUSE OR IMPEDIMENT

"I SUPPOSE you didn't mean to stay in Arden for more than the summer months?"

Cecilia sat in a deck-chair on the beach in the shadow of the cliffs, studying the face of her husband as he lay stretched on the shingle at her feet with Scout, nestled close to his person, blinking in sleepy peace.

There was no question that it had been for Harry's good that she and Sallie had broken through his solitude. There was a change in his face which she could not believe lay only in her own accustomed eyes—it had colour, life, its hard lines were softened or effaced. He looked brighter, better, younger. Without underrating Sallie's share in the transformation, Cecilia was forced to recognize her own. She had his confidence; he spoke to her frankly and fully of what his life had been, of the opportunities and possibilities that still remained to him. She had spent herself in cheering and inspiring suggestion, she had soothed and sympathized, smoothing awkwardnesses from his path, and sheltering him, more often than he knew, from a jarring consciousness of his disabilities. All that she had desired or dreamed of being as a comrade and confidante she was—and

more. She was almost frightened at the complete success of her mission.

For the moment she was content, and beyond the moment she would not look. Their present relations were to her mind ideal; woman-like, she shut her eyes to the future. And even into the present she would not examine too closely. Her devotion to her husband was womanly, not wifely. It had something of the feeling a nurse might have for her patient, a tutor for a pupil, a patron for a protégé. He was the object of her constant care and solicitude, she was keenly interested in his welfare, he filled her thoughts; but she would have felt just the same, she told herself, if she had been his mother or his sister.

On the nature of her husband's feeling for herself she did not choose to speculate. For all the closeness of their intimacy an elusive shade of something impersonal characterized their relations. To Cecilia their confidences seemed like the confidences of strangers speaking with the more freedom from the sense of an unknown past behind and an unrelated future before them. She did not know how far her own careful avoidance of all definite facts in her life contributed to this; whether it was a curious lack of egotism in her husband or a secret proud recognition of the infirmity that separated him from others that gave an impersonal note even to his self-revelations. He spoke freely of his life and adventures, taking for granted that her interest must be in them as novel or amusing experiences, not in himself as the hero of them; and in the same way gave voice to his passing thoughts and speculations, not that, being his, they mattered to her, but that one thinking human being might naturally care to know the workings of another

mind. Alone with her he openly discussed his blindness, which he never willingly referred to directly or indirectly before Sallie, with the frank assumption that it was as a blind man she had given him her interest and sympathy. He sometimes reminded her that he had not forgotten the blind man to whom he owed her friendship; indeed, he showed at first an inclination to discuss this other's case and capabilities, but dropped it when he saw that any mention of the subject distressed her. He spoke often of his brother and his sister-in-law, but never referred to them by name as if they might by any possibility have been acquaintances of hers, or could at some future date become known to her. Under the circumstances an allusion to his own marriage was scarcely called for, and it did not surprise Cecilia that he made none. It only afforded her a huge relief.

His future was frequently discussed between them. He was to begin by writing a book of reminiscences, she and Sallie had determined it. He was to turn out old diaries and note-books, and engage a secretary, and the work, when completed, was to be dedicated to them both. It formed a common topic of conversation; but by tacit agreement the date of the undertaking was left vague. For the present they were all three content to have life's possibilities undefined, to let the summer days go idly by, and yield themselves to the lulling peace and pleasantness of Arden.

So far, this tendency shared by her husband had been a relief and happiness to Cecilia; this morning, out of her sheer content in the present and her dread of any change, she had forced herself, in answer to some careless utterance of his own, to speak of the future.

St. George had been thoughtfully gathering up handfuls of pebbles, sorting, sifting, weighing them, with a quick, discerning touch. He let them slip slowly through his fingers.

"I don't know, I didn't think of Arden at all when I came here. I never supposed life would hold anything like this for me again. I simply came to my uncle's old house at Combe Carey because it was the most forsaken place I knew of. I wanted to be alone. You see," he shifted himself slightly on his elbow, "when your whole life comes crashing down about your ears, your first idea, even before you stoop down and pick up the pieces to see what can still be made of them, is to sit down and swear. I came here to do my swearing."

"And have you done it?" Her voice was very soft and pitiful.

"For good?" said Harry, with a little twist of the lips. "I'm afraid not. I still find myself knocking up against this thing that blocks my path, and when it hurts I call out. I suppose I shall learn in time that it's no use running your head against walls—even ruined walls. It alters nothing and only makes your head ache; but I shall have a few more headaches before I master the lesson. Only I hope I shall manage to keep them to myself. I don't mean to whine to every one as I have to you."

"You have never whined," said Cecilia warmly. "You know I think you one of the bravest men I have ever met!"

Harry grabbed up another handful of pebbles.

"If I could only be dishonest enough to leave you in that belief! I'd like very well to let you think so, but it's a mistake. You see me sometimes, as

you think, resigned, and you call that brave, but, believe me, there's nothing splendid or heroic about it—it's just the working of an ordinary law. Don't you find almost everybody—every sane and normal person—bears a great calamity 'better than you would have expected'? That's a feature of the common human nature that is in us all, and whether it's the greatness or the littleness of it I can't tell you. A man receives sentence of death, or he hears himself condemned to be shut up in darkness for the rest of his life, and because you don't actually see him tearing his hair and cursing his gods you say he takes it well. What else is he to do? You can't groan for more than a certain number of hours every day—and if you do, it is certain you will soon be groaning within four very narrow walls. Those of us who are left to go about the world with an incurable ill soon learn to hush up about it. There's nothing else to do. We bear things—all but a few craven and unbalanced souls—because we have to bear them, but that doesn't mean we're heroes."

Cecilia was silent for a moment, her gaze following a brown-sailed boat that was drifting across the glittering pathway of the sun.

"I can believe there is nothing for a brave man to do but to bear his misfortunes bravely. If you think that a common feature of human nature, so much the better for human nature. It doesn't make a brave man less brave because he is multiplied by thousands. But I am afraid I can't agree with you. There are so many who give up altogether."

"Ah," said St. George slowly. "When I spoke of craven souls I did not mean those who throw up the game and have done with it. I don't judge them.

There may be cases where it seems impossible to do anything with what is left of life—nothing to do but to fling the helve after the hatchet. When you have lived on a little and found how useless—" He broke off and said no more, but busied himself with piling his pebbles in a little pyramid, as if he were building a cairn above his own ruined life.

With a sudden impulse Cecilia leaned forward and touched him softly on the shoulder.

"You never thought of that?"

"Of flinging the helve after the hatchet?" He lifted his face. "No, never seriously. I won't say there weren't moments when, if the way had been easy and— No, I don't really think that I should. I've always had a feeling, d'you know, that if I took my own life I should live to regret it."

Cecilia smiled, leaning back in her chair, with the easing of her dread. "That is the first time I have heard you make one of the speeches that we call 'Irish.'"

"Irish?" he repeated, considering. "Yes, I suppose it sounds a bull. But it isn't such a mad bull as it sounds. You see, I really do believe that our consciousness doesn't stop with this present phase of our existence. I don't profess to be what you would call a religious man—there is so much of religion that is beyond me. I've never heard an argument for immortality that, as an argument, would have convinced me; but I've never heard one that disproved it. So I still let myself believe—I suppose it's the shape of my head—that our life does go on after we seem to die, and that we carry some responsibility for the deeds done here into what you might call the other world. I shouldn't like to look back and feel that

I hadn't played the game out here as well as I could. And apart from that I might find out, seeing clearer, that the game here might really have been better worth playing to a finish than it seemed."

Cecilia was silent. The longing in her heart, that was almost a prayer, that he might yet find the game very well worth playing would not suffer her to speak. The understanding between them was so good that she did not think he would see in her silence any failure of sympathy; but she wished that there were no necessity to put her feeling into words. The interchange of kind and responsive looks being denied them, it would have been so simple, it would have said so eloquently all that she meant, if she could have put a friendly hand on his. But she could not. Never before that morning had she volunteered any physical expression of her pity and friendship, and the memory of her touch on his shoulder was vivid in her consciousness still, though he seemed to have taken it naturally enough. While she hesitated the opportunity for any response went by.

"God save you, brother!" called a cheerful voice from above. "Mr. St. George, that is the salutation of Arden, and the proper response is: 'And you, fair sister!'"

Salome came down the beach, picking her way daintily over the shingle. She had been bathing, but there was no sign of dampness or disarray in the shining masses of her soft fair hair. Her white linen frock was crisp in every fold, each small detail of her toilet was, as usual, precise and perfect. Her cheeks had an unwonted colour, her eyes sparkled with radiant good health and enjoyment of the hour.

Her very appearance, that stopped the words of consolation on Cecilia's lips, seemed to make their utterance futile. Why waste breath in preaching optimism and the worth of living when Sallie's bright presence and gay humour testified so abundantly to the joy of mere existence? Her coming changed the whole tone of their conversation like the sudden infusion of ozone into the atmosphere. St. George responded to her lighter key; only Cecilia fell a little silent. She listened smiling to their talk, and responded to every challenge or appeal of her friend, but of herself she volunteered no remark, only sat gazing dreamily out to sea and thoughtfully stroking the head of the sleeping Scout.

The latter had come to know that his master, in his present company, had no need for his comforting ministrations. He accepted both ladies with patient courtesy, but Cecilia had often speculated on the true nature of his feelings for them. She wondered again this morning. Was he, in his noble dog-like devotion, content to see his master happy and be himself ignored, or was he human enough to prefer that the being he loved should be a little less cheerful and entirely dependent on himself for consolation?

"I think, Sallie," she said later, as she sat at lunch with her friend, "you are a better and more cheering companion for Harry than I am."

"Nonsense, Miggs! Do you know, I said at least a dozen things to him this morning that must have hurt him brutally, and I never thought of them till afterwards. I can't stop to choose my words. You are the ideal sympathizer and consoler. You create a sunny, balmy atmosphere for his wounded spirit; I come along like a blustering breeze and make him

restless and unhappy. Of course he prefers you. Everybody would sooner bask in the sunshine than be blown upon by the breezes."

"No, they wouldn't. There is something bracing and invigorating in a breeze. Sunshine—and sympathy—are enervating."

"Does Mr. St. George seem to find them so?"

"I don't amuse or stir him up," Cecilia continued. "I'm just a woman who is sorry for him. I don't think a man wants a woman who is sorry for him always at his side—not a strong man."

"My dear," said Sallie bluntly, "there are no strong men. Disabuse your mind of the idea that there are once for all. Well, at least, there isn't any man so strong that he doesn't want to be petted and soothed and comforted occasionally with woman's sympathy and admiration. As for inspiring him—well, there are two ways of inciting a man to heroic behaviour. One is by preaching courage and resolution—that's mine. The other is by showing him what a courageous, resolute, and heroic person you believe him to be—that's yours. And really I think yours is the more excellent way!"

The meal continued in comparative silence. When it had ended, Salome joined her friend at the window.

"Was I snappy, Cecil? I found a letter from Lionel waiting for me when I got home, and it bothers me. He wants me to go to Chardleigh for this next week-end, as he will be there—and I'm not going. I shall tell him that I'm wanted here.'

"But, Sallie, if you'd rather——"

"I wouldn't rather. I find it much more interesting here. Miggs, let's have our neighbour to dinner this evening. You shall shed sunshine, and I'll be

the gentlest of zephyrs. You can sing him Irish songs, and I'll let him beat me at chess."

Cecilia was silent for a minute. "Of course, we can have him if you like," she said, without much enthusiasm.

Alone in her room that evening, she deliberately set herself to look things in the face. She had wandered too long in a world of evasion and make-believe: it was time for her to see where she really stood.

She must find out, first of all, the meaning of that vague depression which had been hanging over her all day.

The morning had been bright. She had been quite happy on the beach with Harry—so much so that she had herself perversely suggested an end of the relationship that made her happiness. But Harry had not taken up the suggestion with any eagerness. It was not there that trouble lay. The jar to her content had come with Sallie's appearance; for the first time she had not been glad to see her friend.

She must settle the reason why.

She did not want to be morbid and fanciful. It was possible she had been the prey of vain imaginations this evening. But it had not been a happy evening for her. Salome and Harry, in unusual good spirits, had talked and laughed together—and she had stood aside. Was it a senseless notion of hers, this chill, creeping shadow of a fear—supposing they came to care more and more to talk together and she could not stand aside?

Even her natural instinct for self-blame could not decide whether to scold herself for harbouring such a fancy, or to feel reproach that she had not contemplated such a possibility before. Hitherto, in all

their chance acquaintanceships, it had been Sallie who interested and attracted, Sallie to whom men tried to make love. She herself had her share of friendship and liking—likings that might have turned to something warmer if she had cared to let them; but she had never expected that any man would want to walk, or talk, or flirt with her unless her friend were unattainable. With Harry it had been different. Here Sallie had deliberately effaced herself; he had turned naturally to her for sympathy and companionship, and seemed content with what she gave him. But now, with the stirring of new interests, with the return to a more normal attitude of mind, would her companionship continue to satisfy him? She was quiet and serious, good at consolation, perhaps, but in this case too weighted with her own sympathy to be an ideal comforter. Sallie could give him brightness and laughter, life in the major rather than in the minor key, the cheering influence of a naturally blithe spirit. Was not this what Harry really wanted—would not Sallie, generous and loving to give, have been ready to respond to his need—if she, Cecilia, had not blocked the way?

Here was the nightmare terror that had haunted her from the first days of her marriage taking shape at last—and the cruellest shape Nemesis could have devised. She had thought with horror of standing between her husband and a real love; but that the real love should be her dearest friend, to whom she owed half the happiness of her life, was an ingenious heightening of the evil she could never have contemplated.

She had spoken once, in view of such a happening as this, of setting her husband free; but if it had even

been possible to have their mockery of a marriage dissolved, she realized now that she had not made it easier by thrusting herself into his life. In her anxious attempt to help him she had only tightened the bonds. She felt miserably that there was a kind of curse upon her, that she was one of those unfortunates doomed always to take a wrong course in life, and bring confusion and unhappiness into the lives of those they most wish to serve.

From this mood of despair she started up and began to undress. She would be reasonable and practical. What she feared was a far-off possibility. Even with her natural tendency to believe what was most disadvantageous to herself she could not be persuaded that the danger was as yet threatening. Sallie was the last person to drift, open-eyed, into a hopeless attachment; Harry was not at present in love with her friend; if there seemed any likelihood of his becoming so she would let him know the truth about their marriage.

She turned her attention to preparations for the night. She drew out combs and hairpins with brisk, businesslike energy, feeling herself quite a calm and resolute person. But the calmness and resolution were of brief duration. A few minutes later she found herself sitting on the edge of the bed, her hairbrush drooping from her slack fingers, facing the appalling contingency of telling Harry that she was his wife.

It might not be what she had once pictured it. She was sure now that he would be very—kind. He would not hear of the marriage being annulled—perhaps he would not wish it. He would take her as a lifelong companion readily, even gratefully. She would be his wife and good comrade, and he would

give her a quite genuine affection. Well—she had asked no more than this, she had not expected so much. What was it that made the thought of it all so unendurable?

When in the first sharp stress of pity for her husband she had formed her plan for helping him, she had had in her mind just such an arrangement. She had thought then that the sacrifice of herself and her feelings was not too much to cancel her bond of obligation; she had looked all possibilities bravely in the face and believed herself capable of carrying things through. She was now to understand the difference between a situation viewed impersonally and the same situation with all the human elements made real. More than that, she knew now that she had to reckon with a feeling in herself that made the thought of a marriage based on friendship and not love intolerable to her. When she had first come forward to minister to her husband in his misfortune there was only pity in her heart—and now there was something more. She had shut her eyes up to the latest possible moment; she was obliged to confess the truth at last.

She had not wanted to love her husband. It had been her dread from the day of their first meeting in the lawyer's office that the interest that had touched her imagination then should grow to a stronger feeling. Because in her heart she had always known how easy it would be to love him she had shunned and avoided him, steeled herself against the thought of him, anxiously sought to put the whole world between them, and had piled up barrier after barrier to keep their lives apart. And then, in a sudden impulse of sorrow and sympathy, she had swept all barriers aside; of her own free will she had come to him; she had

thrown away every weapon of defence, and put her woman's heart at his mercy. This was the sacrifice she had had in mind when Sallie preached of the tedium of a darkened life and the trial of an invalid's claims. Because she was so sorry she knew she would learn to care—though caring could bring her no happiness. Pity is not another name for love, as every woman learns sooner or later. But one feeling opens the door to the other. Love had stolen upon her unawares, and the first she felt of it was its hurt.

She put her head down on the pillow, and her loosened hair fell over her clasped arms. She had always known that if she ever cared she would care dreadfully—it was not in her nature to love a little. If Harry had not been blind she might have held out against him. But now the very keenness of her pity had left her resistless before this other stronger feeling that gripped and held her. She was beaten down and powerless before it, and it hurt, oh, it hurt!

It is sometimes hard to believe that the world into which we stare in the darkness with sleepless, fear-stricken eyes is the same world which lies before us at our waking in the prosaic light of day.

Cecilia, though her heart was not at ease and her head ached, was a little ashamed of her tragic fears when she came down to breakfast next morning and found in the sunshiny sitting-room a Sallie pretty and fresh, but entirely practical, making the coffee with a housewifely air, and surrounded as usual by piles of commonplace correspondence.

There was a letter for herself from Biddy on the table, and she took it up eagerly, for they were expecting news of Biddy. But having glanced over it she handed it to her friend with an expression of dismay.

Her sister-in-law wrote that Bernard was coming to pay a week-end visit to his brother.

"I can't run the risk of his seeing me here, Sallie," she said. The thought of meeting her husband with this new secret consciousness in her heart would in any case have been terrible to her, but with Bernard as a witness! "I don't know how much of our plot Biddy has told him," she said unhappily.

"How much did you tell Biddy?" inquired Sallie significantly.

"But she said she wouldn't say anything to him."

"And you believed her? Dearest Miggs! Have you ever met a married woman yet who would hesitate to sacrifice the secrets of the friend she loved best to the husband she didn't profess to love at all? The question here is what Bernard chooses to say—not what he might."

"I can't face him, Sallie," said Cecilia desperately. "Do you think Elizabeth would mind if I came to Chardleigh with you?"

"My dear girl, I'm sure she would be delighted. I'll wire to Godfrey at once to send the car for us. What time shall I say? This morning?"

She crossed the room and took up a telegraph form, with something less than her usual readiness, Cecilia thought. Had she really been so anxious to avoid Chardleigh and Lionel, or was she sorry to be leaving Arden?

CHAPTER VII

THE TANGLED WEB

IF Salome and Lionel enjoyed the week-end at Chardleigh—which as they apparently spent the whole time from the latter's arrival to his departure in one protracted argument scarcely seems probable—Cecilia certainly did not. She was tormented throughout her visit by a constant, restless apprehension as to the revelations that were possibly being made at Combe Carey. More than once she sat down to write to Biddy, demanding to be told to what extent Bernard's secrecy was to be relied on; but the consideration that she might be worrying her little sister-in-law at a time when it was not kind to worry her, held her back. She returned to Arden on the following Tuesday, the limit to which Sallie would extend their stay, in a trembling ignorance as to what enlightenment might have taken place in her absence.

Harry came in in the afternoon. She studied his face eagerly; but except that he seemed rather graver than usual she found nothing to suggest that a startling revelation had been made. Sallie was in the best of spirits at getting back—as she said to her friend—to an Arden without an Orlando, and talked enough to cover the silence of any other member of the party. After tea she returned to the house to send off a

package by the post, and Cecilia was left alone with her husband by the deserted tea-table, under the shade of the cherry-tree on the lawn.

If it had not been for her guilty fears, she knew that she would have been glad to be in his company again. Half-shyly, veiling their interest, as if any sudden glance of his could surprise and detect it, her eyes rested upon him as he sat on the low seat under the tree, absently stroking the dog's head that rested upon his knee. As he looked down the disfigurement of his blindness was hidden; she could only see the fine lines of his figure, his bent dark head, the strong, shapely hands gently playing with his dog's ears. A little foolish thrill made her heart beat quicker. But his preoccupation frightened her. To conceal her nervousness she had taken up some fleecy woollen knitting work, and the soft click of her ivory needles was the only sound that broke the silence. It became at last more than she could endure; she hurried into speech.

"You are very grave this afternoon."

He lifted his head.

"Am I usually such a gay and entertaining person?"

"You are not always so—so abstracted as to-day. I begin to think"—she was talking nonsense, but anything was better than silence—"that you are sorry that we have come back again."

"I am sorry that you went away. I missed you horribly. It wasn't good to find out how much."

Cecilia's heart beat a shade faster. But she remembered that "you" is a plural pronoun. Perhaps it occurred to Harry that he had spoken too strongly, for he also sought cover in the plural number. He took Scout's head between his hands.

"We had a rotten time, hadn't we, old chap? No kind ladies to pat us on the head and feed us with cake. We had to spend our time gnawing old dry bones, with nothing on them."

"But you had a visitor?" She spoke carelessly, drawing out her wool; but her sensation was of taking, firmly though shudderingly, a bull by the horns.

"Yes, my brother was down here," responded Harry. He said no more, and again the conversation flagged. Cecilia could not very well put the question: "I suppose your brother didn't happen to mention that I am your wife?" And until that point was settled she could not give her mind to anything else.

Sallie interrupted them, coming down the garden on a quest for stamps.

"I know you have a hoard in your work-basket, Cecil, my dear, and I'm sure you'll hand them over to a friend in need." Cecilia raised a warning glance, and she saw her slip. She turned to St. George with a ready laugh. "Miggs loves her name so much she hates to be anything but Miggs; and she objects on principle to girls addressing one another by their surnames alone, though in these days, when we are adopting all the other masculine fashions and privileges, why not that? I don't in the least mind being plain Verrinder." She fixed an expressively reproachful glance upon her friend. "There, dear, you see I have taken all. Be sure you remember the debt."

"I will," said Cecilia earnestly.

She was grateful to Sallie for her ready fiction; but had it really been worth while? It was noble of her, for friendship's sake, to credit herself with the manaping proclivities which her soul abhorred; but as far

as Harry was concerned was not the pretence useless? Was he not rather disgusted at their duplicity?

He sat frowning thoughtfully for some minutes after Sallie had gone.

"I know I am hopelessly old-fashioned in my ideas about women," he remarked apologetically at length. "I have a host of antiquated prejudices regarding them which are logically quite indefensible; but I should be very sorry to have that suggestion of Miss Verrinder's put into practice. A woman's Christian name is so much a part of herself." He was silent a moment, playing with Scout's collar. "Do you know, for all the time I have known you, I have never been quite sure about yours. It isn't really—Miggs?"

"No, indeed," said Cecilia, laughing, glad to be able to give a truthful answer; "that is only Sallie's name for me. The first time I met her was at an evening gathering at somebody's house, where we all appeared as Dickens' characters. The girl I was staying with went as Dolly Varden, and I accompanied her as Miss Miggs."

"Miss Miggs!" he repeated in surprise.

"Yes. You know, Sam Tappertit's admirer."

"Oh, I remember her. But I'm trying to think of you in that character. Surely it didn't fit?"

"He doesn't know!" she told herself quickly. He might not think it so wildly out of keeping if he remembered Cecilia Ward. "I believe it suited me admirably," she said aloud. "Sallie thought so, at all events. I have been Miggs with her ever since. You see," she added, smiling a little guiltily, "I can act rather well."

"I never knew a woman who couldn't," he responded promptly; and again her confidence was checked.

"But if your name isn't Miggs—" he persisted, after a moment.

"Oh, I thought you must know. Surely you have sometimes heard my friend call me Celia?"

"To be sure; but I thought that might only be your name in Arden."

"No, I was called that long before I ever dreamed of Arden."

"Celia!" he repeated softly. "It is a pretty name. Celia Cecil."

Now—if he did not know it—was the moment for the truth. She had only to say, "My name is Cecilia St. George!" and there would be an end of all her deception and its dangers. But there would be an end of so much else—pleasant days of frank companionship, untroubled meetings, grateful, unspoken homage—and in their place embarrassment, constraint, disillusion, a forced gratitude, and that horrible marriage of friendship. She could not speak.

"It doesn't go very well," she said hurriedly; "but you must remember I didn't begin life as Cecil."

"No, of course not," he said slowly.

There was a little silence, while he seemed to be turning something over in his mind.

"I wonder," he said at last, "if by any chance you happen to know my sister-in-law, Mrs. Bernard Thornton?"

The work dropped into Cecilia's lap, her hands gripped the arms of her chair. Then she heard her own voice answering with a curious, forced composure, "Biddy Thornton! Certainly I know her."

"Well?"

For once in her life her mind worked quickly, weighing chances and possibilities.

"We were very dear friends before her marriage. Since then circumstances have rather kept us apart. I have not seen as much of her lately as I should like."

"Then do you know my brother Bernard?"

"I have met him."

"It was he who was here on Sunday. It is a pity you were away. You might have been kind enough to help me to entertain him."

"You never told us he was expected. You never mentioned your brother's name to me."

"Didn't I? I suppose I took it for granted you knew—that Rumour full of tongues, in the shape of Myles, had supplied you with the information. He seemed to have told you a good bit about me."

"He never told us that."

She took up her knitting once more. "Liar! Deceiver!" she was saying to herself. "Whatever you are to be to one another in future, he will never trust you again!"

"Mrs. Cecil, forgive my curiosity, but did you ever send Biddy a photograph of yourself in a carved-oak frame?"

"I have sent her my photograph," answered Cecilia, smiling. "I don't know what sort of a frame she put it in."

"This was a photograph," said Harry slowly, "of a girl in evening dress, with a dark fur falling off one shoulder. It came from a Paris studio, and was signed Celia."

"It was probably mine. I don't suppose Biddy has another like it."

"I am quite sure she hasn't. You must be Celia!" He paused. "You don't know what it means to me to find that out. I never thought that in this world

I should know your face. And yet, now I come to think of it—I suppose it was my association with the name—I believe all along I have been picturing you as looking like the girl whose photograph I saw."

His eyes were fixed upon her face. For once she was glad that he could not see.

"But do you remember"—she forced herself to speak lightly—"the portrait of every stranger as clearly as that?"

"Not as a rule. I haven't a particularly good memory for faces. But I happened to damage the frame of your photograph, and while I was trying to put it to rights I had plenty of opportunity for studying your face."

"I see," said Cecilia, chilled.

"And besides that," he went on slowly and with hesitation, "it was in the room where I—it was one of the last things I ever did see—I shall always remember it. And now that I know it was you—" He did not even try to finish the sentence, but sat silent, twisting Scout's collar in his fingers.

"I can't tell him now," Cecilia pleaded with her conscience. "I must leave him to think, if only for a little while, that I am Celia—and charming, before I let him know that I am plain Cecilia and destroy his illusions for ever."

Her husband roused himself from his deep abstraction.

"And Miss Verrinder," he said, "is her name really Rosalind? Is that why you call her Sallie?"

There was never any need to practise reticence where Sallie was concerned, except in the matter of her identity with Sarah Verity. Cecilia often envied her friend when she heard her chattering easily

of her life and doings. She herself was hampered by a hundred restraints. Even in speaking of their wanderings together she was obliged to remember to allow some time of her life to be spent in the company of her hypothetical husband. Sallie knew no such check. But her frank mention of dates and local names and places had at least the advantage of divesting their characters of any doubt or mystery. Her friend being so openly above suspicion, Cecilia had no fear that St. George would attribute her own reticence to anything but natural reserve, or an unhappy past. She had often wondered if it were for that, or because he felt no curiosity, that he had asked her so few questions.

But with the brief break in their intimacy this apparent indifference was changed. Harry no longer disguised his interest in the personal facts of her life.

"There's nothing like a short absence at a particular stage of an acquaintance for fixing its character," Sallie remarked one day. "It is when they aren't there that you really make friends with people, or drop them. Your friendship never joins again at quite the same point where you left it. You find you have either gone forward or slipped back."

Cecilia longed to ask if she believed that between Harry and herself friendship was advanced or retarded by absence. She thought even an outsider must have noticed that something of the frankness and freedom of their intercourse was gone. Whether it was her own secret consciousness of her feeling for her husband, or the uncertainty left by her fear of Bernard's revelations—though she was now convinced that he had made none—she could not get back the old easy confidence.

But Sallie apparently noticed nothing. She no longer discussed the relations, actual or possible, of Cecil and her husband; she rarely, when they were alone together, referred to their neighbour at all. She was occupied with a new story of absorbing interest, and seemed resolved to leave her friend to manage her own affairs.

"Only let me know when you want any lies told," she said grimly, "and I'll do my best to help you. A little exercise in fiction is all in the day's work for me."

Cecilia felt unhappily that deception and prevarication were getting to be all in the day's work for herself. She seemed now so practised in deceit that she had little to learn from any one.

One afternoon, her friend being occupied, she had wandered, vaguely restless, up the cliff path to the point where she had watched the waves with St. George on the first day of their friendship. Somewhat to her surprise she saw him standing there now, a solitary figure, leaning on his stick, with Scout beside him, apparently listening to the wash of the water on the rocks down below.

He turned to her as she drew near.

"There's nothing like it, is there?" he said, without any formal greeting. "I never get tired of listening to it. I don't remember a time when I didn't love it, but now—. You don't know what sound can be to a blind man."

"'It must be wonderful," she said. "Did you really hear me coming, and know that it was I?"

"Quite well!" he replied, turning back towards the sea. "I knew it could only be you or your friend, and I could never mistake your steps. You are alone this afternoon?"

"Yes. Sallie was busy. I got tired of sitting in the sunshine in a pleasant, placid garden, and came up here for a breeze. Did you do the same?"

"I like the breeze," said Harry, taking off his hat and letting the wind blow his hair about; "but I never get tired of the sunshine."

Cecilia's thought flew to a comparison Salome had once drawn. Then she came back to the significance of the words of her companion's lips.

"Oh, I didn't mean—" she exclaimed involuntarily.

"I didn't mean that either," said St. George quickly. "I can love a thing though I don't see it. The feel of the sunshine must be more to me, I think, than it can be to you. But pray don't imagine I always want to be harping on my own limitations, and please don't reproach yourself for the times when you speak without remembering them. It is when you forget, and treat me like a normal man, that I am most pleased with myself."

"I'm afraid," said Cecilia, as they walked back together, "that our sympathy often hurts more than our forgetfulness. You must sometimes have to remember very hard that we really do mean well to be able to bear us at all. You see, it is hard to know; one says too little and feels a brute, or one says too much and becomes a bore."

"If I have ever let you feel that I found you either a brute or a bore," said Harry, smiling, "I should deserve to lose every sense I have left."

They walked on for some minutes in silence. The smile faded from his face. He turned to her presently and spoke, his voice abrupt and deepened with feeling.

"I have been wanting to tell you—but it is so rarely

of late that I have had any opportunity—that I never realized until you went away how much I owed you, how you had changed and brightened my life. I had come to a point where I was beginning to lose heart, and you put fresh spirit into me. You have made everything different. I thought I felt this before, and was grateful, but it was only when you had gone away that I really knew what—what you had been to me, and then I knew that I could never thank you."

"I don't want to be thanked," said Cecilia breathlessly. "You have no reason to be thankful to me—to us."

"To you," he corrected. "It is you I am trying to thank—Celia."

She heard his voice linger over the name, and, turning, caught the look upon his face. No, she could not believe that that look and that tone had ever been there for Sallie. The old fear, or shadow of a fear, fled away for ever. She saw the truth clearly at last, and it was a truth that brought with it a sudden, unlooked-for dismay.

It was not Salome she had to fear as a rival—it was Celia. That fair imagination of herself in her husband's mind was the shadowy third that stood between her and happiness. All that she had wanted or dreamed of, all that she had the semblance of a right to, was there—for the woman he thought her. To claim her right she must kill that fair illusion; she must reveal herself as Cecilia, the plain, the hopeless! And when she had made good her claim what she wanted would no longer be there for her. This was the tangled web she had woven with her well-meant deception. There was no way forward now

that did not mean deceit or disillusion. The facts of the case were as misleading as the fiction she had acted. Her husband would never now know her for what she was. Between his old memory of what she had been and the conception he had built up in his blindness, her real, present self stood as between two strange, separate women, with neither of whom she could claim identity. "In all essentials I am Cecilia," she told herself desperately. But could the blind man believe that? He would believe the woman he had married gifted with an unimagined power of acting, but he would respond no longer to the charm of an assumed personality. More than that, her inward judge rose up against her, sternly accusing. "Your history is Cecilia's. Your husband must know that you are not only the plain, shy girl who had no charm to hold even a place in his memory, but that girl who, for her own selfish interest, went through a form of marriage with a strange man, and has lived on that stranger's money for three years past!" True, he had urged the step upon her, but did a man never despise a woman for the sin to which he himself had urged her?

She walked on, slowly and uncertainly, as blind to her surroundings as the man beside her. She had an idea that he, perhaps thinking he had said more than she would care to hear, made one or two commonplace remarks, she heard herself mechanically answering them; but their words had no place in her thoughts, busy under the shock of this new revelation.

"You are tired," said Harry, suddenly conscious of her flagging steps and vague responses. "Sit down here for a minute and rest."

They were passing the low stone wall that separated

the common from the cliff's edge. Cecilia sank down gratefully upon it, and he took his place beside her.

"I am sorry if I seemed not to be attending to what you were saying," she said penitently. "I am not really tired, but I have—I have been——"

"You have something on your mind," he said gently. "You have had something worrying you ever since you came back from Chardleigh. I couldn't help seeing it. We are always talking about my troubles as if no one else had any. Don't you think for a change this afternoon we might talk about yours?"

Cecilia laughed a little unsteadily; the gentleness of his tone brought the tears to her eyes.

"I don't think mine would bear talking about. I mean, they're not worth it. I dare say I make a good many of them myself; Sallie says she never did know any one quite as clever as I am at stuffing my pillows full of thorns. But they don't hurt less because I'm to blame for them myself."

"And I can't help you?"

"I'm afraid you can't."

He had moved a shade nearer as he put his question. There was no reason why he should not come nearer still—very much nearer, why he should not take her in his arms and let her sob out her trouble against his shoulder—except that he did not know he had the right, and if he knew he had it he wouldn't want it. Instead he drew careful lines on the sand with his stick.

"Are they very present troubles?" he asked abruptly, after a while; "or only the memory of past ones?"

She did not immediately answer.

"Don't tell me if you'd rather not; of course, I've no right to ask. Except that we are friends, and—you never talk about your past life; but I'm afraid it wasn't happy."

"No, it wasn't very." She sat up with a sudden impulse of outspokenness. She would tell him now what he might remember when the time came for him to judge her; he should know something of the cramping misery of her life, and see what had made her what she was when he first knew her, and how she had been ready to take the way of escape he offered even while it shamed her. "I didn't have any great misfortunes, not a great shattering blow, as you did; my troubles were very little ones compared with yours, and I ought to be ashamed to speak of them in the same breath; but they were real to me. For years I seemed shut up in a kind of prison-house; there were walls all round me whichever way I turned, and there seemed no way out and no hope! It all sounds very magnificent"—she caught herself up, half-laughing— "but it wasn't really magnificent at all. Stone walls did not my prison make; I was shut up, it seemed to me, in a kind of brick yard. My troubles were little, petty, sordid things that would not have been troubles at all to some people; yet I suffered. But you would laugh if I were to tell you some of my griefs."

"I don't think I should."

"I laughed—often. But I don't know that those were the times when I felt them least."

"And then?" he said gently.

"Oh, then, one day when things were at their worst and I thought they never could be better my walls fell down with a trumpet blast, like the walls of Jericho, and I walked out—a free woman."

"And happy?"

"Not altogether—except in so far as freedom was happiness. Ah, I can't tell you what that was to me!"

"I think I can guess."

"I don't think you can. No man can appreciate freedom as a woman does, for no man is ever a slave as a woman is."

He was silent, his attention concentrated on a deep hole he was boring in the sand.

"How long is it since your husband died?" he asked abruptly.

"I lost him," answered Cecilia, sitting up and speaking with a touch of hard restraint, "three years ago."

"You were young to have such a loss," he said in a low voice.

"I didn't feel so. In many ways I seemed older then than I am now."

"Then your marriage wasn't a happy one," he said bluntly.

"It certainly didn't bring me all happiness." A laugh struggled with the sob in her throat. The element of ironic humour that mixed itself with all her unhappiest experiences seemed, as usual, to rob her very real trouble of its tragic dignity. "But what I want to tell you," she went on nervously, plucking with trembling fingers at the coarse grass growing in the cracks and crannies of the loosely piled wall, "is that I bore my troubles very badly. I wasn't brave, I wasn't patient. Oh, I dare say I seemed so—I was quiet enough—but inwardly I was always crying against my fate. *I* was weak and cowardly. I would give worlds to be able to look back and feel

I had made a better fight; but it was just one of my troubles that I was a coward. If I had not been, I need not have suffered so—I should not be suffering now in the memory. But that is what you could never understand—to be weak, and to be ashamed of your weakness! Only if you could understand I think you would be sorry for me; you would not despise me——"

Involuntarily, as her voice broke, she put out her hand beseechingly towards him. He turned upon her swiftly.

"Despise you! Good God! As if I could ever despise you!"

His hand fell upon hers as it rested on the wall beside him. He felt it tremble under his touch and, clasping it in his own, he bent down and softly kissed the fingers.

His lips met something cold. It did not need a sense as quick as his own to guess that he had touched her wedding-ring. With a sudden revulsion of feeling he put her hand gently back on the stones and stood up.

Oddly enough, as it seemed to him, the reminder had been not so much of her marriage as his own. He remembered, perhaps rather late in the day, that there was a woman somewhere in the world who wore his ring upon her finger and went by his name. He felt no great reproach on her account that he had not thought of this before, for he could never feel that he owed her any particular loyalty; the consideration that checked him was what Celia would feel about it if she knew.

He had not deemed it necessary, in the first days of their acquaintance, to mention the fact of his

marriage. His one overwhelming disability seemed to lessen the importance of any other. A blind beggar by the roadside, what was it to her if he had a wife or not? It was almost an insult to any woman to go out of the way to reveal the tie—as if to warn her that he was not free to love and marry her—he, who bore the reason that set him apart from any thought of love or marriage written plainly on his disfigured face!

But now that they had become dear and close friends he knew enough of women to feel sure that she would resent his silence. And he did not find it easy to tell her his secret. It seemed hopeless to explain convincingly the facts of his marriage now, when it was difficult for him to understand himself the motives that had influenced him to that mad act. She might not unreasonably believe that some shameful story lay behind it. He wished he had told her the truth sooner, or that she had learned it from Biddy. Why had Biddy apparently never even mentioned the fact of his existence?

If Celia were to resume a correspondence with her friend, the revelation would certainly be not long delayed. St. George began to consider himself the advisability of using his little sister-in-law as a medium. He would have liked to hear from her all that was public of her friend's history. But he dismissed the idea as Cecilia had done. The latest intelligence about Biddy was that she had just added a small daughter to her family; it was not a time to bother her with his affairs. Besides, she could not now write him any letter that he could read, and to have his private concerns made food for Myles's inquisitiveness was not to be endured. He decided to let things stand.

CHAPTER VIII

MOONSHINE

ONE evening about a week later, when St. George went into the cottage for his usual game of chess with Miss Verrinder, he had some news with which to amuse his neighbours.

"Myles tells me that he is going to marry Mrs. Ridge. He seems to think she has had her eye on him for some time past, though I must confess I never detected any sign of it. However, as he says, she's got him! I understand that he didn't yield without a struggle. He frankly admits that Eliza Ridge is not quite the woman he would have chosen to be Mrs. Myles—his taste rather inclines to a buxom, black-eyed beauty. 'But as for choice, sir,' he said, 'it's the women who settle that. When they once make up their minds to have us, there's no escape for the strongest of us!'"

"Wretch!" murmured Sallie.

"He seems to think that it is a man's destiny to be got round by a woman sooner or later. His father and grandfather before him let themselves be got round by his mother and grandmother, and why should he escape the common lot? In short, he is determined to throw himself away."

"I suppose," said Sallie with scorn, "it was Mrs. Ridge's good cooking that got round him?"

"I believe it had something to do with it," assented Harry gravely. He suppressed an inward twinge of amusement. Myles's own explanation of his capitulation had been: "If they can't get us one way, sir, they will another. If they can't catch us through the eye, they will through—another organ!"

"He appears to have weighed very carefully the greatness of the sacrifice he is making," Harry continued seriously. "He thought of all one gives up in marriage and the little one gets in exchange, and he admits he hesitated. And then, as day after day one tasty little dinner after another came up, he said to himself, 'What's beauty? Comfort's the great thing in married life! Why not take and marry Eliza Ridge, a sensible, steady sort of body, with a little laid by, a woman who could cook you a dinner out of the sole of your boot?'—and there he is—caught!"

"But Mrs. Ridge was talking of her plans to me to-day, and she didn't say anything about it."

"Oh, I'm not sure that she has been consulted yet. I have only Myles's word for it that he considers himself booked."

"But that is monstrous!" protested Sallie. "If Mrs. Ridge accepts that insulting proposal I shall never have a good word to say for my sex again."

"Oh, Myles isn't such a bad fellow," said Harry, taking up the cudgels for the prospective bridegroom. "If his wife can endure his conceit, she will find him quite a decent, well-behaved husband. Of course, he's a bit of an ass, but Mrs. Ridge has sense enough for two."

"She won't have, if she marries him," persisted Sallie. She went on with her game, her eyebrows

wrinkled with disapproval. "I wish I could see you more shocked at Myles's revolting attitude toward our sex. But I suppose he only voices—crudely—what you men all think. You all imagine that a woman is always ready to accept any sort of an offer any one of you chooses to make her!"

Cecilia, who was playing Grieg softly at the other side of the room, paused in the midst of a bar; then went on again, slowly and more softly.

"Not at all," said St. George, calmly moving a pawn, "but I think some women sometimes accept very extraordinary offers."

The music tumbled over on to the piano keys with a little bang. Cecilia stood up.

"You haven't finished?" said Harry.

"I can't play any more just now. The room is stifling. And there's a moon outside that it is a sin to waste."

St. George continued the game with some gravity. Salome watched his face with such interest that she neglected the board, and checkmate was shortly declared.

Her opponent took his triumph absently. His mind seemed busied with another matter.

"Miss Verrinder," he broke a somewhat lengthy silence, "did you know Mrs. Cecil's husband?"

"Mr. Cecil?" responded Sallie, with a smile she carefully kept out of her voice. "Yes, I knew him slightly."

He was silent again, thoughtfully fingering a stray chessman.

"You would like to ask me," said Salome, fixing a keen glance upon him, "what sort of a man he was, and you're afraid it wouldn't be good form."

"Oh, hang form!" said Harry bluntly. "What sort was he?"

"It is rather difficult for me to discuss his character with you," observed Sallie demurely.

"Was he such a bad lot?"

"Oh, no, he was what you would probably call a decent husband. He didn't drink, or cheat at cards, or beat his wife."

"Good Lord! Is that all you have to say for him?"

"By no means. He had some quite good qualities. Personally I rather liked him. And I couldn't help feeling sorry for him."

"Why?" The curtness of his tone conveyed to her the idea that he rather resented her feeling sorry for a fellow who was probably quite undeserving of her sympathy.

"Because of his limitations. He lost so much of the good of life. And he had a very sweet and lovable wife, who was capable of devotion, as very few women are in these days, and who might have been all the world to him, and he didn't know her in the least for what she really was."

"I should think in that case," said Harry, with some constraint, "Mrs. Cecil was the one to feel sorry for."

"Well, I was sorry for her too. In fact, I always have an unlimited fund of sympathy for all my friends who are married."

She ended with a light laugh, and hastened to turn the conversation on to lines less personal. "For if I let him ask more questions," she reflected, "it will mean more lies, and there is a limit. I'm not at all sure that the Recording Angel will remember to put down all those I've told lately to Cecil's account."

Cecil did not return to take her proper share of the work of deception. She only appeared just in time to say good-bye to the guest before he went.

It was not the first time he had had to remark a something that seemed like avoidance of him. Rarely since her return from Chardleigh, and never since that walk on the cliffs, had she been for more than a few minutes alone with him. He sometimes wondered if he had offended her on that occasion, if she had thought him guilty of sentimentalities unfitting in a man of his physical disadvantages, or was it possible that she had exchanged letters with Biddy, and learned of the existence of his wife?

He could not quite believe it. There was no visible trace of resentment in her manner; she was gentle, friendly, interested as ever in his concerns and doings, only she kept herself, or allowed circumstances to keep her, aloof, and granted him no opportunity for explanation or confession. He did not think for a moment that Miss Verrinder knew of his marriage. She was so frank, so outspoken, he was sure she would not have hesitated to attack him on the subject. He sometimes thought of taking her into his confidence. He believed she might give him a comrade's understanding and goodwill.

There was no reason, he told himself, why a fact so unimportant in his life should interfere with their friendship. It was only their friendship he asked of Celia and her companion. The neighbourly intercourse of Arden, he supposed, must go by with the summer, but there was no reason, surely, why they should pass out of his life altogether. If he were in town in the winter, and they were in the flat they sometimes spoke of, why should he not keep up some

association with them? They would help him with his book—they would give him advice and criticism. Mrs. Cecil was interested and well-informed in travellers' writings, and Miss Verrinder had good literary judgment. And if he went back to Bernard's, and they were Biddy's friends, there might be other opportunities of meeting.

With a half-superstitious fear he set a bound to his expectations and kept his desires low. He asked so little—he forgot nothing! Destiny could not rob him of consolations that were so moderate—no cruel power forbid him to pluck such flowers as might still grow about the ruins of his life.

There was a visitor in Arden.

He learned of his coming first in the casual references of his neighbours, and later from Myles in detail and circumstance. A friend, an old friend, Sallie said, was coming to dine with them, and was motoring on to his brother's the same evening. There was no suggestion of its being an event of any importance, and no talk of Harry's joining the party.

When he gathered that he was not to be invited to the cottage he made haste to invent some occupation for the evening, and prepared to divest his mind of all curiosity concerning the intruder. But Myles would not suffer him to remain ignorant. He enlivened his master's solitude with scraps of carefully garnered information.

The gentleman next door was a Mr. West. Mrs. Ridge thought he was a solicitor in London, but his family lived here in Devonshire, at a little village called Chardleigh. It was he who had engaged the cottage for the ladies, and he had come sometimes to

take them for drives in his motor-car. He was quite young, that is, about thirty, dark, and good-looking, and Mrs. Ridge thought—— But at this point Harry curtly dismissed him from the room.

"Very short in his temper, the master, this evening," observed Myles to his confidante in the kitchen. "It's easy to see what's upsetting him. I hope those young women next door will be satisfied now. It's no use telling me, Mrs. Ridge, that this asking another gentleman to dinner just now isn't a trick on their part. It's just the sort of artful thing your sex would do, if you found a man slow in coming to the point."

"And do you think Mr. St. George has been brought to the point?" questioned the openly derisive housekeeper.

"I think," said Myles slowly—he shook his head as the vision rose before him of his master sitting dark and solitary in the window of his room, while sounds of music and laughter came through the soft, moonlit air—"I think he's feeling pretty sick, Mrs. Ridge."

Myles was helping Mrs. Ridge wash up the dinner things. It was beneath his office, but the business of wooing a wife forces a man to strange indignities. St. George, wandering out into the garden shortly after, smiled grimly as he passed the kitchen quarters and heard the pompous tones of his attendant above the clatter of dishes, and the housekeeper's brief, incisive replies.

"Sooner or later you are certain to be got round."

There was no escape, it seemed, even for the fools and blind. Love was in the air this evening—in the soft moonlight that he could not see—love, or some-

thing in its guise, among the pans and dishes with Mrs. Ridge and Myles—love and laughter across the hedge sending out its music into the night! Only he walked alone and in darkness.

It was a still, warm night; there was not the faintest whisper of a breeze among the branches over his head; every sound travelled far. His neighbours' windows must be wide open; he could hear their voices and laughter very clearly as he sat on his old seat under the hawthorn hedge. They talked and laughed a good deal, more than they often did when he was with them. Naturally. What else could one expect?

It was so futile and absurd, this feeling of outraged proprietorship. What right had he to resent it that this other man sat in *his* chair, and took his part in the conversation, and enjoyed his share of the sweet siren flattery and fooling—that beguiling feminine enchantment to which a man yields so artlessly in his own person and sees through so plainly when another is the object of it? He knew how they would listen and laugh at this other fellow's stories, and accompany and applaud his singing, just as they had accompanied and applauded, yesterday, the fiddling of that other poor fool they had not, to-day, thought it worth while to ask to make one of their party.

Well, why should they? Who wanted such a death's-head at the feast? They would all be happier and more light-hearted without him. What was he but a chance acquaintance, a forlorn and battered pensioner on their kindness and hospitality? This other, young and handsome and prosperous, was certainly better company; he was an old friend, some sort of connection, possibly the lover of one or other of them.

Ah——

He must have made some sound or movement, for Scout, sitting beside him, suddenly lifted a paw and laid it with heavy sympathy on his knee. He thrust it away almost as if it hurt him.

"I'm sorry, old chap. But we mustn't make a fuss when we're shoved off. What's the good?" He leaned forward, his head between his hands. "We've got to get used to it—we've got to learn our lesson. There are things that aren't for us. We're outside everything that makes life good—love and hope and happiness—we're dwellers in outer darkness, Scout, gnashing our teeth!"

The sound of music came across the lawn to him. He lifted his head presently and listened. This fellow could do what he couldn't—he could sing. His voice was a pleasing baritone. Harry had heard it first in the garden before dinner chanting the old ditty of *Sally in our Alley*. He had wondered for the moment if this were Rosalind's Orlando. But Miss Verrinder was certainly not engaged; and would any unconfessed admirer sing out boldly his intention to "marry Sally"? Besides, he thought drearily, it was not Sallie who had returned from that brief visit to Chardleigh preoccupied and troubled in mind, with old memories stirred painfully to life.

The song the visitor was singing now was one he happened to know.

> "There be none of beauty's daughters
> With a magic like to thee,
> And as music on the waters
> Is thy sweet voice to me."

It was idiotic, of course, to listen to the words

a man sang carelessly and to try to draw hidden meanings from them. He must have been brought pretty low to hang his happiness upon such trifles. But he *was* brought low, he was so helpless, so ignorant, so cut off from the ordinary means of knowledge, he was forced to be guided, as no ordinary man need be, by chance significations; and what these trifles signified was no little thing to him.

Probably the singer was not thinking at all of the words of his song; perhaps only a blind man could appreciate all that lay for him in the difference between his neighbours' voices. Miss Verrinder's was clear and incisive, with an occasional suggestion of the American intonation which some people might find piquant, but which he had always disliked. It was gay and good-humoured, and said kind, friendly things, but a man must be pretty far gone in love before it could sound to him anything at all like music on the waters. Whereas Celia's! He could not believe that the man who was singing was singing that song to any one but Celia, or had any other voice in his mind.

And if he were altogether wrong, and deluding himself with idle fancies, what difference did it make? If not this one—now—it would be some other man some other time. Sooner or later somebody would take her away from him, and fill her life so that he had no more part in it. Or perhaps they would be merciful and leave him her friendship—because he was blind, and out of things, and could not possibly matter. He had fancied not so very long ago that he could be content with that. He had thought, only the day before, that he asked so little—and he knew now that he wanted everything a man can want.

The song ceased and he heard a little murmur of voices, Salome's clear above the rest. It sounded light and cheerful. Whatever the other two might be to each other he did not believe that she was anything but a friend. She seemed to be asking for a particular air, and presently the man gave it.

It was a song Harry knew well, a song which hackneyed as it has become, still lends itself to a fine rendering. It seemed to his jealous fancy that he was hearing it sung now with more than artistic spirit. The rush of passionate words, sounding through the summer night, stirred his senses and moved him in spite of himself. Just so would any man wish to sing to his mistress.

"Thou art my life, my love, my heart,
The very eyes of me."

And she let him sing that to her—this other man who had everything that he had lost! As if from any one else in the world but himself those words could come with any real meaning!

He got up suddenly. He could not sit here any longer and listen to their cruel and mocking music. He passed through the gate and went along the cliff path.

He did not know how far he walked—probably not nearly so far as he thought, and it was not nearly so late as he imagined as he stood again before his own gate.

Voices arrested him as he drew near, voices in his neighbours' garden or just outside the gate, a man's and a woman's, in earnest low-toned conversation.

He drew back into what he thought must be the shade, meaning to turn and beat a swift retreat. He

did not want to cut short any lovers' interview. It was awkward not to be able to see enough even to keep out of people's way.

Then the man raised his voice and spoke as if it seemed his companion were trying to send him away.

"I'm just going. Good-bye, and thank you for having me here in Arden, and for being so kind to me —Celia."

As he spoke the last word a kiss fell softly, so softly that only a blind man could have heard it.

Well, why not? They might be already engaged. Or probably it was only her hand that was kissed. He had done the same thing himself not many days ago, and called her Celia, too, and if she chose to allow this fellow the same liberty, what business was it of his?

He stood still, as he thought, in the shade and heard the footsteps move away, but he was too sick with bitter, unreasonable rage to notice which way they went; it was some minutes before he roused himself and made a quick movement towards his own gate—and struck with force against another figure standing beside it.

He gripped instinctively, and his hand closed on something soft and filmy, covering a woman's arm.

"Celia!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

"Yes"—her voice was unsteady, perhaps from the shock of the collision, but she laughed—"it isn't Rosalind."

He let her go.

"I beg your pardon," he said stiffly, "I hope I didn't hurt you. I didn't know you were there—still."

"You knew I was there—before?"

"I couldn't help it. I assure you I had no intention of spying on you."

"Spying?"

"I mean eavesdropping."

"Oh." The correction seemed to touch her, as any reference to his blindness, however indirect, invariably did; her manner became gentle and friendly. "That was Lionel West who was with me. He is a very old friend of Sallie's. I always hope that one day she will marry him. I was just telling him so. He has been wanting it for years."

He was silent for some moments; then he said rather gruffly:

"I didn't ask you for that explanation."

"No, of course not, and there was nothing to explain. I was only telling you because I thought it might interest you. I believe you are friend enough to both of us for that."

"You are always kind," he said, disarmed by her gentleness, yet still with a shade of bitterness. "I ought to have warned you that I am in a vile humour this evening—really not in a fit mood to talk to you. I believe the wisest thing for me to do would be to take myself off before I have contrived to offend you."

"Do you know what the time is?" she asked suddenly.

"I should imagine it is somewhere about midnight."

"It isn't ten. Lionel has something to say to Salome before he goes, and I should like to be out of the way. I wonder if you would walk a little way up the path here with me. I am afraid to go alone. We needn't talk if you think we are in danger of quarrelling."

He turned without a word, and they went up the

cliff together. There was no speech between them—no sound but the occasional tap of his stick and the sweep of her skirt against the short turf that bordered the path.

At the brow of the cliff she paused and looked over the sea.

"It is like the night when we first came," she said in a still, hushed voice, as if afraid that her words might break the spell of its beauty. "This is the second—no, the third moon we have seen in Arden. Does it seem to you as long as that since we came?"

"No. Does it to you?"

"Longer, I think, and yet it has been short too. There is a boat with a white sail drifting across the moonlight, just as there was that first evening. A white sail sparkling on a blue sea!" She laughed softly. "Do you know, when I was a young girl that picture was in all my dreams. When life was limited and hard I used to shut my eyes and see it—a white sail on a blue sea—waiting to carry me away to the land of my desires. This seems the very night to embark on such a voyage."

"I have a boat down on the beach," said St. George suddenly. "It has oars and not sails, and there is nothing fairy-like about it, but I could take you for a little row if you cared to come."

"Really? Do you mean it?"

"Why not? It is so late nobody would see us, even if there were anybody here that mattered. And it is perfectly calm. Would you be afraid to trust yourself to me?"

The question was bluntly put, and his voice hard rather than tender, but hers was soft as she answered.

"No!"

"Although I am blind—or because of it?"

"Your blindness has nothing to do with it," she said quickly. "I should always trust you."

"Then come. This is the path down to the beach."

"It is rather dark in the shadow of the bushes."

"Is it? Then give me your hand. I know my footing here perfectly."

She went down the steep and narrow path, her hand in his, and watched, with pleasure in the sureness of his movements, while he unmoored and launched the boat. Then he came back to her side.

"You won't be cold? There may be a little breeze on the water, and your dress is thin."

"I don't think I could possibly feel a chill this evening. And I have a scarf."

"But you've only slippers on your feet?"

"Yes."

"Then you had better let me lift you into the boat. The stones are wet."

Cecilia had, however, already mounted the side of the boat, and now sprang lightly down into it.

"Were you afraid of me?" he asked, following her in and grasping the oars. "Did you think I should let you fall?"

"No, but there was no need for you to help me. If we were wading in deep water it would be another matter."

"I am going to let you steer," he said dryly, "so it will be your own fault if we get into deep water. My intention is only to hug the shore."

Cecilia took the rudder lines. No, there was to be no deep water to-night. There should be nothing that would force her to tear down the curtain of illusion between them. She read his mood perfectly.

She was sorry that he suffered. But the misapprehension he suffered under was kinder than the truth would have been. The truth should not be spoken to-night. She would have this one hour of make-believe, of magic and moonshine—it should be her one dear memory in all the years to come.

She looked about her, drinking in the still beauty of the night—the irregular, huddled roofs of the next fishing hamlet, the tall shadowy cliffs, the trail of light across the water. The boat slipped swiftly through a sea broken by scarcely a ripple. She held the ropes, and Harry rowed, bending towards her with every vigorous, rhythmical stroke. Was not here her girlish dream realized—as dreams are realized? Not a magic, white-winged bark on a sunny, sparkling sea—the sea was dark, and the boat moved forward at the urging of blind human effort—but it moved towards the light.

"I wish you could see the moon's path upon the water," she broke silence softly at length, as they moved out from under the shadow of the cliffs.

"We are in the light now, aren't we?"

"Yes—how do you know?"

"I don't know. I think I can feel. It's a fine night, isn't it?" He rested on his oars.

"Glorious. I wish I could tell you how it looks."

"I think I can guess pretty well. I've seen a good many moonlight nights."

A faint shadow clouded her face. This night was like no other to her. She was jealous of his past memories of moonlight.

There was a few minutes of silence so deep that she heard the oars creak in the rowlocks as he drew a sudden breath.

"It's very still, isn't it?" He lowered his voice instinctively. "We seem alone in the world."

"Oh, we are in two worlds!" she exclaimed impulsively. "I wish you were in mine!"

"Ah!" The muscles of his face contracted sharply. As plainly as if he had spoken she read the meaning of his look. "Was it kind to remind me of that? Why do you force me to think of things that can't be? Why not let me forget for once that my world isn't yours?" She could not bear the silent reproach of his face. She turned her eyes away.

"I wonder," she made a tremulous effort to keep at a safe ordinary level, "how nearly our worlds touch. Is a moonlight night just like any other to you?"

"This moonlight night isn't," he answered grimly. "But I know what you mean. You think perhaps there is a sort of sixth sense, some other channel by which impressions reach the mind of those who can't see. It may be. I can't imagine, if every other sense were gone, that it wouldn't be different to me to be by myself in my own garden, and to be here on the open sea—alone with you—" He seized the oars with sudden passion. "Oh, I could be not unhappy, I believe, even in my dark world, if I weren't fool enough to let myself dream of something that might have made the loneliness less awful, and the darkness not so black!"

He fixed the oars in place and rowed swiftly and strongly back to land. Cecilia sat very mute in the stern. She let him carry her ashore, and stood by while the boat was safely beached. He turned to her when it was done.

"I apologize for my bad humour. I told you I wasn't in a companionable mood to-night. Unfortunately it isn't necessary, it seems, for a man to *see*

moonlight for it to make a fool of him. Come, I will take you home."

"Mr. St. George," said Cecilia, with an effort, as she went with him "I want to ask you something. You spoke in the boat just now of your loneliness. I told you that Biddy Thornton was my friend."

"Ah!" said St. George, standing still for a moment on the moonlit shingle. "And she has told you, I suppose, that I have a wife?"

"I thought," pursued Cecilia, walking on—"I mean, I wondered if it was necessary—for you to be lonely."

"What has Biddy told you about my marriage?" he asked abruptly. "Not much, I should think; she didn't know much."

"No, very little. I only know that you are separated. I wondered if the separation were likely to be final?"

"It is absolutely final," he asserted emphatically. "If Biddy led you to believe there was a possibility of anything else she was entirely mistaken. It is only fair to my wife to say," he added more quietly, "that not a shadow of blame in any way rests upon her. You might not unnaturally think that there was some ugly story connected with our marriage, but there was nothing of the sort, either on her side or mine. My wife is everything that is most exemplary— No," he checked his mocking tones, "that is a heartless way of speaking of her. She is a good girl, and I dare say a nice girl, but one of the very last women in the world I should choose to share my life with. I never felt a spark of love for her, and I never should, if we lived side by side for a hundred years. We never have been anything whatever to each

other. I had only seen her two or three times when I married her, and I haven't set eyes on her since. It sounds a mediæval sort of business, our marriage. I think I was rather a mediæval sort of fool when I made it. But I was so sure I should never want a wife in any real sense. I meant to live a life where there would be no place for a woman. I didn't think then what my life was going to be. It seems we are all doomed to leave out of our calculations the factor that finally upsets them."

They had made their way up the path to the cliffs. He would have given his hand to Cecilia again to help her, but she refused his aid.

"And you are quite sure," she said, with a touch of hardness in her voice, "that your wife couldn't help you or comfort you now in any way? That she wouldn't try, if you asked her?"

"I think it's quite likely she would come to me if I asked her, but it is a thing that would be impossible for me to ask. She would come out of pity—or from a sense of duty. If I were dying for companionship I wouldn't have it on those terms. I don't want any services I can't pay for. I don't want her pity. There is only one thing that would make it tolerable for me to take from any woman the sacrifice my degrading helplessness would compel me to ask of her; and she couldn't give me that, and I shouldn't want it from her if she could."

He spoke with a harshness he had never before expressed towards his wife, or indeed felt; but he was for the moment harshly inclined. She stood between him and nothing he might have had, but the recognition that this make-believe marriage was all he was ever to know, this shadow of a wife the sole

companion of his days, stung him to a sudden soreness of resentment.

Cecilia did not grasp the meaning of his mood. She only thought how deep must be the ill impression she had made upon him and how impossible it was that any later influence could efface it from his mind. A little feeling of bitterness seized her too. She walked a few paces ahead, her gaze fixed proudly before her.

Not hearing his footsteps behind her a minute later, she turned her head, and saw him on the grass beyond the path, his foot dangerously near, it seemed, to the crumbling edge of the cliff.

She was at his side in a moment and laid her hand on his arm.

"You were walking so close to the edge," she faltered, as he turned in some surprise. "It frightened me."

"But I knew where I was. I wasn't in any danger."

"Then I am sorry," said Cecilia, biting her lip, "that I touched you. I know you don't like to be helped."

She moved on a few paces. He made a quick step after her and joined her.

"I have never minded your helping me, though perhaps—I sometimes think—it would have been kinder if you never had. Even to-night, if there had been real danger of my falling, wouldn't it have been the greatest favour you could do a useless, broken man to let him tumble over the side of the cliff, and end it all?"

"I wish you wouldn't say such things as that; I can't bear to hear you."

All her efforts could not keep the sound of tears out of her voice. He turned towards her and caught her hands in his, and a hot tear fell upon them both.

"Celia! My God! you are crying! Celia, is it possible that you care—like that?"

She struggled to release her hands. "You know I should care if you tumbled over the cliffs."

"I don't mean that. There is no danger of my falling, and still you cry. Celia, darling!"

He would have put his arm round her, but she drew herself away. All her heart cried out to her to let him hold her, to take this love that was offered, even though it was offered under a mistake. But something stronger than her heart rebelled. She would not cheat him out of his kisses.

"You mustn't! If you don't think of your wife, I can't forget her."

"This has nothing to do with my wife. Do you think my marriage makes more of a bar between us than my blindness? Do you think, even if I were free, I would marry you? Bring you into my dark world, to be a clog and burden on you all your days! Heaven save me from the selfishness of taking such a sacrifice as that from any woman!"

"But you said if your wife——"

"She would be my wife already, God help her! But of my own free will to bind the woman I loved to my ruined life——"

"If she loved you," faltered Cecilia, "it would be no sacrifice. She would only care the more because you were blind."

"Do you think so?" He turned away, and his face changed. "I am afraid you don't quite understand," he said, after a moment. "That is senti-

ment; it isn't love. A woman might care, as you say, for a man in spite of his blindness; she couldn't care because of it. That would be against nature. It isn't, unfortunately, for things like that we give our love. I thought I couldn't be mistaken in your feelings. It wasn't likely that you should really care."

"But if I don't, and you can't marry me," she said, after a moment, "what difference does it make?"

"It should make no difference at all," he said bitterly; "but it does. I'm selfish enough to *want* you to care. Because if I—blind and broken, helpless and disfigured, with no future before me but one of dependence and deprivation—could win the love of such a woman as you, I could at least feel myself a man again and not a piece of human wreckage. Though I might take nothing else from you, the thought that you had given me your love would change the whole world to me, and I would be grateful to you in my heart to the last day of my life!"

"Such a woman as you!" What mockery his own words would seem to him when he knew! How he would despise her for having cozened him into believing her—that sort of woman! She twisted her hands in hopeless distress.

"If you only knew!" she murmured.

"What!"

He came to her and took her trembling hands in his. She felt his grasp strong and warm. Oh, would it not be better to pass out of his life now, now while he loved and believed in her, before she could feel his clasp grow cold?

"If you had never had a wife, nor I a husband!"

"What difference does your husband make?" His voice was changing, softening, and—was it hope

that was dawning in his face? "He is dead. I wish, too, you had never had one. He was a brute, and he didn't love you as he ought. I hate to feel his ring on your finger. I should like to throw it into the sea!"

He drew the ring a little way up her finger as he spoke. She snatched her hand from him.

"You needn't! I will throw it into the sea myself. And I wish I could throw away the memory that I ever let it be put there!"

He heard the quick swish of her skirt as she moved across the grass to the cliff edge, and caught a faint, far-off tinkle as if something had struck a pebble out on the beach. "Celia!" he cried, and made a step towards her. But she slipped past him and was gone.

CHAPTER IX

DAYLIGHT

"'THERE is, sure, another flood toward, and these couples are coming to the ark! Here comes a pair of very strange beasts!'"

"What do you mean, Sallie?"

"I mean Touchstone and Audrey—that is, Mrs. Ridge and Myles. I've just been having a conversation with her. It seems the base woman is actually going to accept that man's insulting proposals. But to do her justice, her reasons are as little flattering to his vanity as they can be. She has made up her mind to remain with Mr. St. George whatever happens, and as Myles seems equally a fixture, she thinks it would be more comfortable like if they were married. 'He isn't what I should have fancied once, miss, but we get less particular as we get older; we find there's so little to choose between the men, when all's said. He's honest and he's saving, and he doesn't drink, and I think he's one to appreciate a wife who can do for him as I can.' You see, her head isn't turned by his condescension; there's no doubt in her mind who gets the best of the bargain. It doesn't apparently trouble her in the least that she is ten years older than he is. She knows that age cannot wither her, nor custom stale the infinite variety of her recipes. A more self-

satisfied couple I never met with. There are no tremors or trepidations on either side; no question of 'Am I worthy of her?' 'Isn't he too good for me?' I really think it might be considered an ideal match. I did venture to point out to her that by marrying Myles she was simply confirming his abominable notion that any woman was ready to marry any man rather than none at all. But she only smiled pityingly at my ignorance in thinking a wife could attach any importance to her husband's opinions. 'A woman's got to put up with some foolishness or other in her man; what does it matter? Her business is not to try and put sensible ideas into his mind, but to put good food into his—' I'm sorry, Miggs, if you don't like it; but she did say so. Oh, look here, Cecil, you aren't listening to a word I'm saying. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Cecilia, getting up and walking to the window. "You're always imagining there is something the matter, Sallie."

"There very often is," said Sallie.

She followed her friend to the window, where the latter sat plucking the leaves from a rose-stem that thrust itself forward against the ledge.

"I haven't yet been informed what Mr. St. George was saying to you on the cliffs yesterday evening."

"And I haven't heard what Lionel was saying to you in the kitchen garden at the same time," returned Cecilia, with a faint answering smile.

"Well, I'll tell you. He wants me to go down to Chardleigh this week, and stay there for the rest of the summer. At the end of that time I am either to agree to marry him myself, or to look out some nice girl of my acquaintance who will do it for me. At

least, that is my alternative; but Lal won't hear of it yet. He is evidently drawing hope from the precedent that it was when Una was deserted by St. George that she took up with the Lion."

"This week!" Cecilia lifted her eyes quickly, and looked away again. Salome seated herself beside her.

"Cecil, dear, is it kind to carry on the play any longer? I haven't bothered you with questions and comments; but you can't have any doubt now what your husband's sentiments are."

Cecilia twisted a rose she had plucked in her fingers; she did not look round.

"No, I have known what they are for some time. He is in love with Mrs. Cecil—with Celia."

"Well, he could scarcely love you by any other title, for he doesn't know one—except Miggs. No doubt the rose by any other name——"

"Sallie, it isn't the name. He loves me as Celia—as a personality that is no more mine than the name is. He has made an ideal of what he imagines me to be and fallen in love with it."

"Well, is that so uncommon? It would be fortunate for many men if they found the difference between the ideal and the real so little of a shock."

"If I were a stranger," Cecilia went on, unheeding, "it would be different. He would lower the ideal gradually in the real, as people have to do in marriage, and for my looks he could still imagine what pleased him. But with me the disillusion would be sudden and complete. He knows me—or thinks he does; he has seen me, and seen me at my very worst. I know what I am in his mind and what I shall always be. He will never lose that impression of me—never! It

will change me altogether in his imagination. His whole feeling for me will be altered."

"Cecil," said Salome gravely, "is love such a slight thing as that?"

"It isn't slight at all, any more than life is. You know how that lasts out through all sorts of privation and ill-treatment, and yet such a trifle ends it at times. It is just so with love. If I had some dreadful sin to confess, Harry might forgive me; if I were cold and indifferent, he might perhaps care the more——"

"But you think the shock of finding you his wife, a tender-hearted and devoted wife, will be sufficient to destroy all his affection for you?"

"No, but to find out who I am will rob me of any charm I had in his mind. I dare say he might still give me—affection. We have become such friends that even as a wife he may not altogether dislike me. Probably he would rather have me in his life than be left to his loneliness. I can imagine that we might really get on very well together. But—but it is something much more than that now that he feels. It always seemed to me the sweetest thing in life to be loved like that—and I thought no man ever would care for me so. Yet it is that way Harry loves me—now."

"And always will! Cecil, darling, it is *you* he loves, not any imaginary woman. It is your sweetness, your sympathy, the sound of your voice, the real you, not the false, outward self he knew years ago. Do try and believe me. Oh, Miggs, if we didn't know that Mr. Despondency's daughter, Much Afraid, died unmarried, I should believe you were her direct descendant."

Cecilia sat silent, drawing the rose through and through her fingers, her eyes looking away over the garden.

"I wish I could believe you," she said in a low voice. "Oh, Sallie, I should so love to think it true, but I can't. If I had only myself to consider, I would go right away now and never see him again. I would keep all that has been as a memory—I should be happier so than to stay and see his face change and hear the difference in his voice when—when he comes to me thinking to find Rachael, and it is Leah."

"I do beg of you, Cecil," cried Sallie, starting up, "not to entertain such a preposterous idea!"

"I'm not going to act on it," said Cecilia, smiling faintly. "I've no right to. It's my duty now to stay with Harry if he wants me. I have made myself necessary to him in a way; if he is content to take me for what I am, it wouldn't be fair to leave him. I dare say he will be. Men aren't like us. They settle down in a much more matter-of-fact way to the second best. He will forget quite soon what his feeling for me is now—it is only I who will remember always—and see the difference." She brushed the loose rose-petals from her skirt and stood up. "There will be such a long time for remembering; do you wonder I have put off telling while it was possible? But of course I must speak some time. Only I am a coward, and I dread the confession more than I can say."

"Shall I tell him?"

"What difference would that make?" She took up a basket from the oak settle. "I am going into the garden to get some flowers; if Harry comes you can send for me."

The little garden was at its brightest and sunniest as she stepped through the porch, but she went down the flagged walk quite unheeding. At the back of her mind was a feeling that she was looking at everything for the last time—that the summer idyll was over, her dream of love dreamed, and a waking world stretched before her, practical and prosaic.

She went through the gate and along the path, and sat on the stone wall bounding the common. All the path was thronged with memories, but above them all rose a vision of the night before, bitter-sweet. Ah, why, when love was offered her, had she taken nothing of it? She might have added something warm and living to those shadowy recollections that were to be the real food of her hungry heart amidst the commonplace kindnesses which would surround her in the years to come.

She sat on the wall, as it seemed to her, for a long time, though it was not really long. She was afraid to go back to the house. She shivered with something of her old nervous terror at the thought of the interview before her. She dreaded the moment when she would have to stand before the man who loved her and say, "I am Cecilia, your wife; I am that hopeless, that impossible person you married, the last woman in the world with whom you would care to share your life!"

Would it make much difference that she was not altogether a hopeless and impossible person now, and that they had been drawn together in spirit and sympathy? Scarcely. He had told her in plain words that it was not for any qualities of soul that men and women loved one another; the bar to love he found in his own physical disadvantages showed

her how he would feel towards those too plainly remembered in herself.

She rose at last and retraced her steps. Sallie would wonder what was keeping her. She remembered she had come out to get flowers, and listlessly gathered a few as she went up the garden path. The sound of voices reached her as she stood outside the porch, and she pushed back the heavy cottage door and entered quickly.

Her husband stood facing her in the middle of the room. Something curiously strained and still in his attitude and in the set lines of his face arrested her on the threshold. Her face blanched suddenly, and the flowers she held slipped from her nerveless fingers and fell in a scattered heap to the floor. Salome, leaning over the back of a chair, looking anxiously up at the man, turned and glanced towards her.

"Cecil!" she cried in troubled sympathy.

The undisguised name told Cecilia all she needed to know. She looked at her husband, but neither spoke nor moved. He made a step forward.

"Miss Verrinder," he said, in a voice that showed rather careful mastery, "has just been telling me the secret you preferred to keep from me."

Cecilia was dimly conscious of her friend's face turned towards her. She thought she felt a glance of penitent appeal, but her own gaze was fixed blankly, piteously, upon her husband's face.

"And you are angry?" It seemed to her that it had taken hours for her lips to form the words.

"I have no right to be angry." His tone still refused to rise above a chilling, expressionless restraint. "I am sure you had the best possible reasons for what you did. Personally, I think it would have been as

well if there had been no deception. It might have saved some unnecessary trouble to both of us."

Cecilia's throat was dry. Had she ever dreamed he would take it like this, and she not die rather than face the ignominy of such an interview?

"I—I thought I might help you," she faltered painfully.

"You have helped me very much," he responded formally, "and I am not ungrateful to you. It was very good of you to go out of your way to cheer my dulness, to give me so much of your company—but of course, as a wife—" he paused, "that's all at an end," he finished abruptly.

"Of course!"

She stood before him, pale and sick with shame, stabbed through and through with a bitter anguish of humiliation. Her sacrifice had all been for nothing. He did not want her, nor anything she could give. He had waked from his love as from an idle dream. She need not have feared a marriage of friendship; even that was outside his desire. He rejected her as a wife of any sort, and was angry that she should have thrust herself into his life. She had disregarded the conditions of their marriage, and given him the unnecessary trouble of reminding her of the nature of their contract. . . . Well, she would not forget it again. She only prayed that he would not say another word but go—go quickly—and relieve her of the intolerable burden of his presence!

He moved towards the door.

"Mr. St. George," cried Salome suddenly, "wait one minute!"

"No," he turned to her quickly, "don't ask me to wait. I believe I am expressing myself very ungra-

ciously, but this has come upon me so unexpectedly. There is no reason why it should, of course. I might have guessed. I seem to have been blind in every sense! I will see you again—I will call here before you leave—but just now, believe me, it is kinder to let me go."

He found the door and went out hurriedly, treading Cecilia's flowers under his feet as he stepped over the threshold.

Scourged with shamed thought, bruised in every fibre of her being, she sank into a chair by the table and buried her face in her hands.

"If only you had let me go away before you told him!"

"Cecil!" Salome came swiftly to her side. "I haven't told him—not what you think! You interrupted us, and then I imagined you would say something every moment that would set him right. I only said that your husband wasn't dead, and I had reason to believe that the separation between you might not be final. Don't you see what was the blow to him? Go after him now and tell him the truth. Tell him who your husband is and see if he still wants to keep up the separation. No, don't stop to kiss me. Run quickly, in case something has happened to him. You should never have let him go off like that."

St. George was standing in the window with an appearance of staring blankly before him.

He had been standing thus motionless for many minutes while Cecilia watched him silently from the doorway. She was pale still and shaken with the strong emotion that had gripped her. She could not even be sure that the scene she had just passed through with such agony of mind might not be an

anticipation only of the actual experience before her, and courage failed her when she tried to speak.

A breeze blew through the room and fluttered a curtain against Harry's face. He turned and made a movement towards the door as if to shut it, and Cecilia came forward, softly speaking his name.

"Mrs. Cecil!" He concealed his surprise with an air of formal courtesy. "I did not hear you come in."

"I had to come," she murmured breathlessly, "to explain."

"It is a pity you should trouble," he said coldly; "there is nothing that needs to be explained. I am afraid I behaved very unpardonably just now, and I am full of apologies, but I don't think that talking will mend the matter. There is really nothing more to be said."

"Oh, but there is," said Cecilia, coming nearer. "I want to tell you about—my husband."

She could not help a little thrill of stirred feeling, a catch of tears and laughter in her voice. The sound struck Harry's ear, and broke up his careful and constrained composure.

"I don't want to hear about him—now! Why did you never speak of him before? Oh, I know I didn't speak of my wife, but I didn't think it could matter to you whether a sightless block of a man like me were bound or free. It would have been only one more barrier between us, and I thought there were so many—and such hopeless ones! I thought I could love you clearly recognizing those barriers, expecting nothing and hoping nothing. I thought if I could I wouldn't have bound your life to mine—you, with years of youth and happy possibilities before you, and

I, dropping into a blighted middle age. I only meant to be your friend, to have your interest and sympathy in my life and your dear companionship when fortune willed it. I believed I could be content with that. . . . And then, with the first breath of hope you gave me—that I was fool enough to think you gave me—I lost my head, as you know. . . . I behaved very badly last night. I shall not easily forgive myself. To appeal to you—to hope to find in you—perhaps even to rouse—feelings that could only be misery to you if you had them, was criminal selfishness. But last night was a night of moonshine and madness. I was deluded into thinking all sorts of impossible things might be possible—that I might get my foolish marriage annulled, that with time I might conquer some of my helpless dependence, that I might win you for my wife, and winning you, find some of the happiness in life other men have found who have lost as much as I. It sounds real midsummer madness—but I had persuaded myself into believing such things might be, last night, after you had left me, and I went home in such a paradisaical state of mind that I tried to jump over my own gate—and came sprawling on the other side. I might have known, of course, that when a blind man tries to leap barriers nothing else is likely to happen—that the only paradise a blind man ever lives in is a fool's! Well, I'm on the ground this morning." He thrust his hands deeper into his pockets and took a few turns up and down the room. "And now you want to tell me about your husband? You needn't. I know what you're going to say. I ought to have known last night. When a woman throws a man's ring into the sea she either hates him very fiercely, or loves him very much. I'd no reason to

think, from anything you had ever told me, that you hated your husband at all." He stopped abruptly before her. "Do you love him very much?"

She looked up at him, the colour rising in her cheek while her lips hesitated over the answer.

"Celia!" he said huskily, "why don't you answer me? You know I can't see your face. But of course you love him—your silence is answer enough. And are you going back to him? to spend the rest of your life with him?"

"If he wants me?"

"When?" curtly ignoring the condition.

"I—I don't quite know."

"You mean," he said, catching the hesitation in her voice, "that I've no right to ask such a question."

"No, indeed I don't!" she cried, with a little sob of laughter. "Nobody has a better one than you."

"Than I?"

"You! Oh, Harry, Harry, you are blind indeed, and deaf, and dull beyond belief! Have you really never guessed in all this time that I am Cecilia—I am your wife?"

"My wife! Are you playing with me? It isn't possible!"

"It is—if you will only think!"

She saw him gather together his bewildered thoughts, casting his mind back to spoken words and significant silences, trifles that had mystified and misled him—she saw the first blank, incredulous amazement pass from his face and a dawning belief take its place. And then—was it disappointment? Was it a spell broken? The dear lady of his dreams, the charm and mystery of his love, gone for ever—and in their place a plain, stiff, unlovable girl, awkward and shy.

"But you told me you were Celia," he said at last.

"Yes. That girl in the photograph was meant for me; I have sometimes called myself Celia."

She was leaning against the wall—all the colour gone from her cheek—her eyes fixed searchingly, unswervingly, on his; those blind eyes that could not see her face and read its piteous questioning, and lie to spare her. And the moments of his silence seemed long beyond all counting.

"Oh, Harry," she faltered into speech at last, "I am so sorry. I knew you would be disappointed when you found I was your wife!"

The sound of her voice, with the memory of all it had meant to him, drove the cloud of perplexity from his mind; the pitiful break in it touched him to the heart. He made his way across the room and caught her in his arms.

"Disappointed! No, by Heaven! I don't care what you were—what I thought you. You are the woman I love, and you are *mine!* Do you know what that means to me, Celia?" He took her face between his hands and touched the soft waves of her hair. "You shall always be Celia to me. I believe that other girl was a delusion of the senses, or you were acting her, as you acted Miss Miggs. The real *you* is the girl of the photograph whose face was the last woman's face I ever looked at in this world."

He bent to kiss her, but she put out her hands and held him back.

"Ah, Harry, wait one minute. Would it make any difference if I were to tell you that the photograph *was* flattering—that I am not really as good-looking as that, though perhaps not quite so plain as you thought me once?"

He laughed. "Not a grain of difference. What do I care what you look like? You will always be beautiful to me. If only I hadn't been such a blind fool while I had my sight! We need not have wasted all these years, and then I could have given you something better than a place in my darkened life."

"It is the place I want," said Cecilia softly. "It is all the happiness I could ask in life to be near you and to be able to help you—to feel that you want me."

"Want you! My God, if you only knew!—" he stopped suddenly. "Perhaps you do know," he went on slowly. "Is it just pity for my infirmities that has brought you here, Celia? Are you only anxious to do your duty as a wife? If it is, that isn't enough. Even pity may not be strong enough to stand the strain of the life you will have to lead with me. You may weary of me one day, and the claims I shall make on you. And I should never be so blind that you could hide that weariness from me. Are you sure it is love, darling, and not pity that makes you willing to sacrifice yourself?"

"Quite, *quite* sure! I know the difference between the two. While it was only pity, it wasn't perhaps very easy to give up my pride and come to you, not knowing that you would want me. But now that it is the—the other, Harry, there is no such word as sacrifice ever to be spoken between us again."

"Then here!" Holding her hand in his, he put his fingers in the pocket of his coat and brought a small, shining object to view. "Myles found this on the beach this morning. He gave it to me and asked if I thought you had dropped it. I meant to return it to you before, but other things drove it out of my mind. Let me put it back now where it belongs."

He placed the little gold circlet gently on her finger.

"It's to have and to hold, this time, Celia, for better, for worse—to love and to cherish, till death do us part! Now let me kiss my wife."

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